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EQUINOX TOM, The Bully of Red Rock; or, Dan Brown's Master-stroke.

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AUTHOR OF "THREE-FINGERED JACK," "GOSPEL GEORGE," "THE LONG HAIRIED PARDS," "OLD BULL'S EYE," "PACIFIC PETE,"
"JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," ETC., ETC.



THE BLADE, BROKEN BY THE MARVELOUSLY DIRECTED BULLET, SPUN THROUGH THE AIR.

Equinox Tom, THE BULLY OF RED ROCK;

OR,

Dan Brown's Master-stroke.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "ALABAMA JOE," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," "CAPTAIN COOL BLADE,"
"SOL SCOTT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A COMPLICATED AFFAIR.

THE dingy, dusty, alkali-stained coach was jolting heavily over the rough road, its four horses bearing traces of long and hard travel, breasting the steep ascent with a sulky vigor as the long whip-lash coiled swiftly around and awoke the mountain echoes with its pistol-like cracking. Fortunately for them the stage-coach was not heavily laden. The sleepy-looking Jehu on the box; two "insides," both men, and just now so busily engaged in conversation that neither of them appeared to notice the roughness of the trail or the romantic wildness of the region through which they were then passing.

One of the two passengers who were booked for Red Rock, the present terminus of the stage-line, was young, of handsome face and graceful yet athletic form, dressed after a fashion that smacked more of Broadway than of their present rude surroundings. There was an eager, almost anxious look upon his face as he bent forward in his seat, the better to hear the answer of his traveling companion.

This did not come at once. The man to whom the question had been put, seemed at a loss, and a puzzled look filled his eyes and rested upon his face—deep, black, wonderfully bright eyes, and strong, masterful features—a face not easy to read.

Judge Bruno, of Red Rock, as he had introduced himself, was one of those men who cause even strangers to turn for a second look and carry away with them the impression of having noticed a more than ordinary man.

In stature he was somewhat above the medium height of men, but so very broad-shouldered and massively built that he seemed dwarfed in height. His limbs and torso might have graced a giant of old, and his head was in keeping, lion-like and well-balanced, with a magnificent *chevelure*, the slightly curling locks of glossy blackness falling over his broad shoulders.

His complexion was very dark but clear, his face smooth shaven; his full lips were vividly red, giving him a sensual look and leaving one in doubt whether he was most saint or sinner. His dress would suit either character, being of fine yet plain material, well cut and made. He wore no jewels in his linen; nor were there any weapons visible on or about his person.

"Elisha Dunwood—no I don't remember ever hearing the name before," he uttered slowly, his voice deep and mellow. "He left New York under a cloud, and some time ago, you said, I believe?"

The young man, Reuben Baker, nodded shortly.

"Yes. But he must be at Red Rock. My information—"

"Not by that name, at any rate," interposed Judge Bruno. "But you know what sort of people flock to these new mining towns; one-half leave their real names behind them—and I believe you have struck the right scent, after all. Unless I am mistaken, you want to ask for Old Neb—short for Nebuchadnezzar—sometimes called 'the devil's own' by way of a surname."

"I'm afraid that cannot be my man," said Baker. "He was finely educated, a gentleman in speech and carriage—"

"Yet a criminal, by your own telling. My dear sir, anything is possible in this glorious country. In certain stages of his drunken fits, I have heard Old Neb reel off Greek and Latin poetry and orations by the hour—have seen him deliver an eloquent argument for 'his client', addressing a blind and three-legged mule at the court before which he was pleading. When one finds it convenient to change his name with his location, he frequently leaves his old habits at the same time, and blossoms out into a wholly different character. So it has been with Old Neb, no doubt."

"And he has a girl—a young lady of eighteen—with him?"

"I believe so, but we sinners of Red Rock proper don't see much of her," was the careless response.

"It may be the man I am looking for," thoughtfully uttered Baker. "But what a curious *sobriquet* to adopt!"

The judge laughed softly before replying. "Given, not adopted. I have often heard the explanation, though the title was bestowed before my advent. If you are at all curious—ah! I see you are."

"Well, though harmless as a lamb when he is sober, Old Neb is what we call a 'mighty bad man' when he has got a cargo of Red Rock

whisky aboard. I don't know as he means any particular harm, but he always wound up a spree by burning powder freely, shooting at any and every thing that came in his way. Then, when the reaction came, and when the boys began to think of retaliation in the way of a stout limb and a snug noose, Old Neb would 'light out' and lay low until the storm blew over. It was on one of these occasions that an acquaintance from the upper mines came in and asked for the old man, when a witty fellow replied that 'the devil's own was out at grass.' That was enough. Henceforth he was known as Nebuchadnezzar, and has come to answer to that name as though he had been christened thus at his birth.

"Did he never do any damage in these fits of insanity?"

"I believe he fitted three or four fellows for the bone-yard, but unless tradition lies, Red Rock did not suffer very heavily in losing them. Of course there were some hard feelings among their cronies, and no doubt Old Neb would have been lynched, only for his daughter. She lived in town at that time, and was a sort of popular idol among the miners—all in a strictly moral sense, however. A man who breathed a word against her purity, then or now, would find a dozen duels on his hands before the words were cool upon his lips."

The judge ceased speaking, and thrust his head out at the window in the stage door, peering ahead with an eagle glance. A few moments thus, then he drew in his head, and his young companion noted a curious change in his expression.

No time was given him for comment, for at that instant a loud, harsh voice shouted:

"Halt! Hands up, Dandy Briggs!"

The old, familiar call that has temporarily frozen many an ordinarily brave man's spinal marrow since the day when gold was first discovered in Sutter's mill-race—a summons that, always expected, always comes unexpectedly, and is seldom disobeyed by either drivers or passengers.

For the former, the excuse is ample. Driving day after day over the same route, it would be simple suicide to incur the especial enmity of the knights of the road, for, sooner or later, an ambushed shot would cut short the foolhardy fellow's life. It is this knowledge, not cowardice, that influences the often execrated stage-driver.

More than once in days gone by, had Dandy Briggs obeyed the stern summons, though a more fearless soul never filled human body, but now it was different. This was to be his last trip as driver. In Red Rock a rosy-cheeked damsel was even then watching the hill above town for the first appearance of her lover; and in the express treasure-box was his little all—his hard-earned savings which were intended to set that damsel and himself up in house-keeping.

Dandy Briggs turned pale as death when those words met his ear and he saw a burly ruffian start up from the bushes just ahead, face masked and revolver leveled, for he knew that it was no joke. One moment of hesitation as he thought of dear Rose Allen—then his lash whistled through the air and left a bloody stripe along the haunch of his leader. Swiftly another stinging blow fell—and then the snorting horses plunged forward with a suddenness that almost carried them out of their harness.

An angry yell of surprise came from the road-agent, and Dandy Briggs saw half a dozen more masked figures arise from ambush as he crouched low upon the box.

A spiteful report, followed by another and another, rung out above the clatter of the wheels upon the rocky road, and venomously the ragged lead hissed around the driver's head. A red-hot iron seemed pressed against his cheek, and the face of poor Rose Allen floated vaguely before his vision, but then the bloody mist cleared, and he laughed aloud in reckless defiance as his good horses carried the coach safely past the outlaws. A clear road before him, and safety assured—poor Dandy!

Inside the coach, there was equally decided action.

Though he might have been new to such peculiar incidents of Western travel, Reuben Baker showed more coolness and decision than many veterans have under similar circumstances. The moment that hoarse challenge rung out, he flung back his coat and drew a revolver, crying:

"We can beat them off! Defend that side—I'll take care of this—What the devil do you mean, sir?"

For Judge Bruno grasped his arm with a force that almost imbedded his fingers in the firm flesh.

"You fool!" growled the judge, his eyes aglow with a lurid light. "Fire a shot and we are lost! Those fellows can riddle us and the coach too in a moment—"

"Hands off! I'll fight for both, since you are such a coward!" cried Baker, angrily, wresting his arm away and taking a swift aim through the open window at an outlaw as the coach plunged forward.

A snarling curse broke from the other's lips, and his face was that of a fiend fresh loosed

from hell. He drew a heavy revolver from its place of concealment, and brought the silver-bound butt down upon the head of Reuben Baker with terrible force. A gasping groan—then the young man lay a lifeless weight, his head out of the window.

Without a second glance at the hapless victim of his treachery Judge Bruno thrust his head through the other window. He saw the coach had passed safely through the ambush, that the baffled road-agents were looking after it in confusion as though bewildered at having lost their prey.

"Slick as a whistle, jedge!" cried Dandy Briggs from his perch as he twisted his head around and caught a glimpse of his passenger. "Ef the durned fools 'd 'a' laid fer us at the foot o' the rise, they mought 'a' tuck us into camp, but it'd puzzle chain lightnin' to ketch us on this down-grade— God above—oh! Rose—"

Shifting in his hand the revolver with which he had so treacherously quieted Reuben Baker, Judge Bruno discharged two shots in swift succession—not at the demoralized enemy behind, but straight up at the honest, beaming face of Dandy Briggs! Poor Dandy saw the motion, but could hardly have realized the foul treachery. The light of one honest blue eye went out forever as the first shot entered it and crashed upward through his brain. Close beside it entered the other, but poor Dandy Briggs never felt a second pang. He had escaped those he knew to be enemies, only to fall by the hand of a supposed friend.

Through the blue veil of smoke Judge Bruno saw and recognized the death stare upon that honest face before it fell down upon the seat, and he knew that he had nothing further to fear from that quarter. He glanced back and waved one hand impatiently toward the irresolute road-agents, then uttered a snarling curse as they were hidden from view by the coach plunging down the long, steep descent.

"Curse the awkward scoundrels!" he growled, champing his strong white teeth like an enraged boar until flecks of froth stained the vivid scarlet of his sensual lips. "I've done my share of the work—and more. If they had done as well—"

His words were cut short as one wheel of the stage struck against a small boulder and almost upset the vehicle, dashing his head against the edge of the window and cutting a gash across his temple.

In an instant his mad rage vanished as he realized the full force of the peril that threatened. Not only his carefully laid plans were in danger, but his life as well.

As hinted in the last words uttered by poor Dandy Briggs, the attack had been made by the road-agents near the upper end of the long ascent, that spot being selected, no doubt, because the dense brush on each side of the trail afforded the best ambush for miles either way. And it was such a rare thing for any driver to refuse compliance when challenged, that no pains had been taken to guard against the unthought of contingency.

Had the stage been "held up" lower down the hill, nothing could have saved it from being robbed, even had the judge proved as true as he was treacherous, but Dandy Briggs saw the chance of saving his little fortune—his and that of his bride elect—and made the bold attempt.

Two or three plunges of the lash-scarred horses carried the coach up to the level, and as many more took them to the point where the long descent began, a descent steep and winding, perfectly safe with an ordinarily careful driver, but now—grim death lurked in every curve and narrow spot. The terrified horses were plunging down the trail at breakneck speed. The clumsy coach was pitching and swaying on its leathern braces like a cockle shell in a heavy sea, gaining momentum every second and threatening to run down the horses before it.

With strong and experienced hands at the reins, the danger might gradually be lessened and finally overcome, but Dandy Briggs lay dead upon the box, the brake was thrown off, the reins hung useless; and each instant the end drew nearer.

Again that fierce, snarling curse—then the red lips were firmly compressed and Judge Bruno proved that his refusal to fight the road-agents did not proceed from lack of personal courage.

He burst open the door with a single thrust of his foot, only to have it hurled shut again as the stage bounced over another stone. That ugly light flamed up anew in his eyes, and his white teeth ground together as though they must splinter with the force. He grasped the door, and throwing his enormous power into the effort, he wrenched it from its hinges and hurled it away from the coach.

He paused for one glance at his fellow traveler, who now lay wholly inside the coach, flung back from the window by the jolting. His head rested against the middle seat. His eyes were half-closed, and blood was trickling down over his face. Dead or still alive, there was nothing to be feared from his interference now.

It was a peculiarly difficult as well as perilous task which Judge Bruno had set himself

but he was defeated. Reaching through the doorway, he grasped the iron railing which surrounded the top of the stage with both hands, then swung his person forward and upward until his feet caught upon the foot rest of the driver's seat.

The effort and his great weight caused the stage to tip and pitch more than ever, and for a moment his bronzed cheek grew ashen as death stared him in the face. But then the vehicle righted itself, and with a desperate effort he flung himself over the railing and lay on top of the stage.

Enormous as was his strength, he was panting, and big drops of sweat stood out upon his brow, but he dared not lose a moment now. Only a few rods ahead lay the greatest danger of all, and if unguided by a strong, dexterous hand, the coach would almost certainly be hurled from the narrow trail down upon the ragged rocks a hundred feet below.

Slipping forward, Judge Bruno settled himself upon the driver's seat and caught up the lines which dead Dandy Briggs still held in his stiffening fingers. Setting his foot upon the brake, he shoved it down with all his power, until the hind wheels ceased to revolve, sending out showers of sparks as the iron tires ground over the flinty stones. Steadily he tightened the lines, but made no frantic efforts to check the runaway team, throwing all his skill into getting them under reasonable control and to avert the terrible danger now in sight.

The narrow road-bed made an abrupt curve around a shoulder of the hill. On the left was a low wall built of bowlders upon the edge of an abrupt fall, almost perpendicular. To the right rose a smooth-faced rock for many feet. The coach must be kept close to the face of this, yet if a hub or the body should touch the rock, nothing could save all from being hurled over the escarpment.

Judge Bruno bore harder upon the brake and tightened the lines as the perilous turn was neared. His teeth were firm set, his eyes glowing like living coals of fire, for he knew that another breath would decide all—would give him renewed life and success in the bold game he was playing, or forever end his subtle plottings in death!

Now! He leaned far over to the right—so far that his uncovered head fairly grazed the face of the rock, and a sharp point caught and tore out a lock of his hair!

A breathless moment of horrible suspense, during which the coach swayed and leaned over toward the abyss, running for thrice its length upon two wheels—then a gasping breath burst from Judge Bruno's lips as he felt the stage settle down level, and knew that the peril was past.

Before him lay a comparatively level stretch of road, and as the power of the brake began to make itself felt, he tugged upon the stout lines until his wheel horses almost lay upon their haunches as their iron-clad hoofs plowed over the stony soil. Steadily the pace slackened, then finally the stage came to a standstill.

Judge Bruno brushed the dripping perspiration from his face and glanced backward, a grim, hard laugh bursting from his lips as he viewed the death from which he had so narrowly escaped.

Then he thrust two fingers into his mouth and uttered a long, shrill whistle that rung through the rocky heights like the scream of some wild bird. Almost instantly there came a similar sound in answer, and the hard-set face relaxed.

"Then they did see and understand my signal!"

The words were still warm upon his lips when several of the road-agents, still masked, rushed around the curve, and, followed by their comrades, surrounded the stage.

"A pretty botch your cursed blundering would have made of the job, only for me!" he growled, showing his teeth as they came up. "No back talk! Drag that fellow out from the hearse—H—l and furies!"

In evident fear of the truculent speaker, one of the masked men rushed to the stage door, or where the door had once been, only to reel back with a gasping, horrible groan as a revolver exploded inside, wheeling half around and falling at full length, blood and brains streaming from his shattered skull!

His comrades shrunk back in momentary fear, but with a furious execration Judge Bruno leaped to the ground and plunged headlong into the coach. There was a second shot, followed by a brief but desperate struggle, then, as the road-agents flocked forward, Reuben Baker was hurled headlong out of the coach into their midst.

"Alive, curse ye! Don't kill him, or I'll murder the lot of ye!" snarled the judge, following after, blood flowing freely from a flesh wound in his face.

Still weak from the terrible blow he had received from the hands of his treacherous fellow traveler, Reuben Baker was quickly overpowered, disarmed, gagged and bound hand and foot.

"You are hurt, judge," said one of the masks. "Better let me look at it—it may be more serious—"

"Only a scratch—the game-cock sent his spur through my cheek," laughed Judge Bruno. "I'm not sorry, for that bullet hole will speak louder for me than my own tongue, when I carry the news of this awful affair into Red Rock," and once more he laughed, devilishly.

He bent over the bound man, unheeding the angry fires that flashed in his eyes, and opening his coat, searched every pocket carefully. Once more he laughed as he opened a long note-book and glanced over the papers it contained, and there was a Satanic triumph in his tones as he addressed Reuben Baker.

"Here is all I lacked, my good friend. And now I'll give you a free answer to your questions of a short time since. I do know Elisha Dunwood and his daughter, the lovely May. And more—before you see her future husband—"

What further taunts he might have uttered were cut short by the clatter of the iron express box which two of the road-agents had flung to the ground. Thrusting the papers into his bosom, Judge Bruno arose, a black scowl upon his brows as he sternly cried:

"Hold there! Put that box back where you took it from! How dare you make a move without my orders?"

The road-agents fell back from the box, but made no further signs of obedience, and the judge saw that, great as was his influence over these wild spirits, he must not stretch his authority too far. Inwardly he was burning with rage, but he was a good actor, and there was conciliation in his tones as he added:

"You surely have known me long enough to place full reliance on my word, boys. I am playing for a rich stake now, not for my own benefit only, but for us all. Had you stopped the stage as intended, the treasure should have been yours, but now you must let it pass, or my plans may be ruined."

"The death of Dandy Briggs and my hurt must be accounted for. I can only do that by swearing the road-agents shot him, and I saved both his body and the treasure by taking his place—"

"Or that we took the treasure and afterwards turned you loose," quietly interposed one of the masks. "We deserve some pay. Two of the boys are dead—"

"And there'll be company for them over the river, if I am crossed in this!" cried the judge, his rage flashing forth, and a revolver filling each hand as if by magic. "You dare to show your teeth to me, after all I have done for you? Back with that box, or by the Eternal! the devil shall have a feast, here and now!"

It was one man against a dozen, but the superior nerve of that one man triumphed over the many. Just as the jackals skulk and cower when the lion roars, so these lesser ruffians yielded to his fiery spirit, and in sullen silence replaced the treasure box.

Judge Bruno laughed pleasantly as he replaced his weapons, and there was a frank, hearty ring in his voice as he added:

"That is as it should be. The chief must rule, or the league will go to the devil, tail-on-end! You shall not lose anything by your discipline, for I will divide among you, dollar for dollar, as much gold as there may be in that box."

A low but hearty cheer greeted this generous speech, and Judge Bruno knew that all fear of revolt was past.

"Now to business! You must guard this fellow as the very apple of your eye. Kill him rather than let him escape, but remember that either one may lose us an enormous fortune. Take him to the den, and hold him safe until I can come. George Pangloss, to your especial guardianship I consign him."

"I'll guard him as I would my sweetheart, judge," promptly uttered the man addressed, a tall, athletic looking fellow.

"You'll lose nothing by being faithful. Now about the boys who were killed. This is Sam Hoover—"

"T'other is Dick McBride. This young cuss popped him over jest as the hearse started up," growled one of the road-agents, rudely kicking Baker.

"Both shall be avenged, but not just now. Bear them to the den, or else hide them where they'll not be found easily. Their faces are too well known in Red Rock, and if discovered may cast suspicion too close home for comfort."

"Some of you must obliterate all traces here; up on the hill don't matter, for the blood there will correspond to the story I must tell when I reach town. Get to work at once, two of you. The rest head at once for the den, use care and break your trail well, for it is likely there will be a search made for the assassins—ha! ha!"

Reuben Baker's feet were unbound, and he was forced up the hill. Two men, having bound up the shattered skull of the dead outlaw in his coat, to guard against leaving a bloody trail, lifted the corpse and followed after.

Judge Bruno climbed up to the blood-stained box, and with the dead body of poor Dandy Briggs lying at his feet, touched up his leaders with the whip, rattling away at a lively pace, coolly arranging every detail of the thrilling recital with which he was to regale the ears of

his fellow-citizens, and thereby stamp himself as a hero of the first water instead of the treacherous murderer he had that day shown himself.

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

"WHAR-away in sech a rush, beauty?" called out a hoarse, whisky-thickened voice. "Hope ye ain't tryin' to run away from yer best fri'nd, be ye?"

The one thus addressed turned abruptly and faced the speaker, eyes flashing, face pale but not through fear.

"I run from nothing in the shape of man or beast, Equinox Tom!" came the sharp retort, and a very charming picture she made, with background of green shrubs and gray rock.

A child, one would say at the first glance, noting only the trim, dainty little figure in its half-boyish costume so admirably fitted for a ramble through those wilds: but a second glance would reveal the error of the first.

No child could ever boast a form like that, with swells and curves so admirably proportioned. A woman in years, in person, and in mind was May Dunwood. A strange, wild and unnatural life had been hers ever since she could remember. Few girls have been doomed to such a lot, and very few were they who could have passed through the fiery ordeal as unscathed as she.

Judge Bruno had under rather than overstated the truth in what he told Reuben Baker, not five minutes earlier in the day, though miles lay between the two spots. And as this chronicle has much to do with the strange fortunes of the maiden, a brief glance at her past and present must be given in this place.

All that she could remember of her life had been passed amid the wild West, living from hand to mouth, now almost starving, again in possession of means ample to supply their wants for years had it been carefully husbanded; but it never was.

Elisha Dunwood was what is popularly known as a "bad egg." He "would not do to tie to," was another expressive definition freely applied to him, and if the truth must be told, he was tricky and deceitful beyond computation. Yet he was no man's enemy more surely than his own, and only for his inordinate love of strong drink, he doubtless would have stood high in Western society as a bonanza king, his foibles forgotten in his wealth.

There is no exaggeration in this statement. Gifted with a powerful mind, thoroughly educated, an eloquent speaker, a far-sighted man who had the nerve to grasp the chances offered and bend them all in his own favor, a dozen times Elisha Dunwood fairly grasped the treasure of a king only to lose it forever through his one all-powerful weakness.

At such times he was transformed into a veritable demon, though acting deliberately and like a man in full possession of his senses. He would arm himself and start upon the war-path, shooting or cutting at all whom he met, be they friend or foe, man or woman. Rarely did one of these sprees end without bloodshed, miserable marksman though the old lawyer was, and his own person bore a dozen scars of bullets fired in return by those he assaulted. But through it all he seemed to bear a charmed life, and each time making his escape, he would steal little May away and they would wander on and on until another mining camp was struck.

At times they found that the reputation of "the devil's own" had preceded them, and short shrift would have greeted the old lawyer, only for the presence of little May.

Even as a child she was marvelously beautiful, with a look of sad wisdom far beyond her years. More than once she had stood up before the threatening miners and pleaded for the life of the only relative she knew. He, weak and trembling, not yet recovered from the effects of his last debauch; she, like a little queen, humble, yet commanding.

Only those who have spent months and years in an almost womanless mining town can even imagine the influence such a pleader can exert; and on solemnly swearing to let liquor alone and behave himself, the runaway lawyer was suffered to settle where he chose.

To do him justice, he fought hard against his besetting sin, and strengthened by May, those mad spells grew less and less frequent. Yet they did come, and then the old story was repeated. Wild delirium, followed by flight and hiding; then more weary wandering in search of another refuge.

A black, bitter, hard life surely, but little May grew up into a woman even more lovely than had been the child, self-reliant and fearless of danger where only her own self was concerned, yet gentle and lady-like through all. Naturally her pathway was thickly strewn with dangers that might not have threatened an ugly girl, but she brushed past these with unsoiled skirts, and few were the open insults offered her. Once she had been pressed to the wall by a half drunken brute, and in defense of her honor she had not hesitated to use her weapons. Since that day she had never left the house unarmed, and so it was not through fear that she tried to avoid a meeting on this day

with the rude fellow who called himself Equinox Tom.

Almost a giant in size, his massive torso and limbs in good proportion, gifted with enormous strength and no small share of activity, Equinox Tom had fairly won the title he laid claim to: that of being "chief" of Red Rock. Had his bodily prowess been less, he would have been a better and a happier man. His features were good, even handsome, and had once been intelligent. But he gave ear to the knot of human jackals that ever follow the heels of such a man, and grew insolent and a bully. Liquor flowed freely for the "chief," as it always does, and Equinox Tom was rarely wholly free from its influence, though now and then his unsteady nerves warned him that he was going too far, that while he was making a brute of himself, he was slowly but surely sapping the foundation of the perilous high on which he stood. And a vanquished "chief" finds himself in a sorrier plight than the dying lion—none so mean as to do him honor.

Now, as he looked upon the proud, beautiful face of the woman who confronted him half defiantly, a trace of his lost manhood returned to Equinox Tom, and a flush of half shame deepened the ruddy tint upon his bloated face. But he crushed back the sensation. The time for that was past.

"Thar ain't many he-critters as would gain-say my claim to bein' a man, pritty," he said, with a harsh laugh, "but I'd be willin' to be called a dog, ef so be you would only speak to me kindly now an' then, an' mebbe pet me a little—"

Despite the annoyance she felt, May could not help laughing at this idea, and Equinox Tom grinned sheepishly, in doubt whether to take that merry peal as a rebuff or an encouragement. May saw this and quickly dispelled his vague hopes.

"I have no use for a dog—most certainly not one with such an unenviable reputation as *you* bear."

"Needn't be so durned sharp about it, anyhow," and there was an ugly light in the blood-shot eyes of the bully, brought there by the ringing contempt in her voice. "You may be glad of a watchdog some o' these days."

"My choice certainly will not fall upon *you*," and the maiden turned abruptly away.

But Equinox Tom was not to be thrown off so easily. He had come there for a certain purpose, and meant to carry it out, sharp words or soft.

"I'd jest as soon walk as stan' still, so suit yourself, beauty," he said, with a short laugh, one stride of his long legs carrying him beside her.

May Dunwood stopped short and confronted him.

"Choose your path, and I will take another. You can have nothing to say to me, and I have no wish for your company. Is that hint strong enough?"

"It mought be, ef I was minded to take any, which I ain't," laughed the fellow, not flinching before her scornful gaze. "I've been waitin' a long time fer jist sech a chaine as this, an' I ain't agoin' to throw it away."

Despite his laugh, there was a dogged earnestness in his tones that the maiden read aright. Her cheek turned a shade paler, but there was no trace of fear in her voice.

"Speak out, then. But use as few words as possible, and choose them well. I am only a girl, but I have weapons and know how to use them in avenging an insult."

"Don't kick over the britchin' afore you're hurt, beauty," insolently retorted the bully. "I've faced bigger popguns then them you kerry, when mad eyes was squintin' long the bar'l straight at my heart. I never flinched then—'tain't likely I'll skeer now."

"Spare me your boasting. Say what you have to say, and leave me in peace," sharply retorted the maiden.

"It kin be done up in a lump, short an' sweet, ef so be your fancy runs that way. Yar it is in a mouthful: I'm chuck over head an' years in love with you, an' ax you fer to be my wife."

This was bluntness, with a vengeance, and though May Dunwood had expected something of the sort, she was taken aback for the moment. Not longer than that, and her reply was equally to the point.

"And I most decidedly decline the *honor*," with an unmistakable emphasis on the last word.

Half-drunk though he was, Equinox Tom could hardly have expected a more favorable answer, but in spite of this, the big veins in his forehead swelled with anger, and the evil light deepened in his eyes.

May Dunwood turned away as if she considered the interview at an end, but once again he stood in her path and obliged her to pause. One hand fell upon the silver mounted revolver that hung from her belt, but the angry bully did not heed the motion.

"Wait—I ain't done yit," he uttered, his voice husky with passion. "I ain't a dog to skulk away at one word, an' you ain't sech a high an' mighty person that you can't change your mind when good reason is give fer it."

"You have the only answer I will ever give on that subject to such as you. Were you not so despicable, I should hate you. Were you the last thing on earth in the shape of a man, and were I the last woman, I would sooner take my own life than your hand as a friend—much less marry you."

Equinox Tom turned fiery red, then a sickly yellow as May Dunwood uttered these words, her voice ringing with utter contempt. Even his thick skin was penetrated, and it was a poor attempt at a laugh that he made, saying:

"Hard words break no bones, beauty. A month or two under my trainin', an' you'll be meek enough—"

"No more! Stand aside and let me pass, or take the consequence!" cried May, her revolver flashing forth in the sunlight, the muzzle on a level with the ruffian's heart.

But Equinox Tom was no common man. He saw that the enraged and insulted girl meant all that she said, and with a swift, ducking motion he frustrated her aim. The pistol exploded, but the bullet spent its force upon the hillside beyond, and before she could fire again, Tom grasped the weapon and wrenched it from her grasp.

"You're too p'izen keerless to hev the handlin' o' sech dangerous playthings, beauty," and he laughed mockingly as he thrust the pistol into his pocket. "None o' that!" he added quickly as May cast a swift glance around her.

"You can't outrun me, so don't try it. I'm a bad man when I once git my mad up. Don't stir me too deep—don't you do it, for your own sake!"

There was no mistaking his meaning with that lurid fire in his eyes, and May felt her heart sink within her bosom as she confronted him, pale but outwardly composed.

"You dare not harm me. Even your vilest mates would rise up against you and tear you limb from limb—"

"I don't mean to hurt you, unless you force me. You're too dear to me—I love you too much—bah! you'll soon git over that," he sneered, as he saw a tremor pass over her frame at his words. "Let me once break you in—git you fairly bridle-wise, an' you'll think more'n a heap of me. An' it's got to come to that. Look here—I'll prove what I say."

"Thar's the old man—your father. I've got him under my thumb. He only lives beca'se I let him. An' why do I let him? Not beca'se I love the old coon, but beca'se you're his daughter. Through your love fer him, I've got a hold onto you, nur I don't mean to loosen my grip ontel you're my wife, safe an' sound. You understand?"

"I'll die first!" passionately cried the maiden.

"No, Old Neb'll die fust," laughed Equinox Tom. "True as we part here without your solemnly swarin' you'll be my wife afore the month's out, jest so sure it is that your father'll pull hemp afore this time to-morrer! 'Twon't do no good fer him an' you to try to run away. You'll be watched too close fer that, and the fust sign that a-way, I'll putt the noose around his neck."

These blunt words were uttered with an earnestness that carried conviction with them. The life of Elisha Dunwood had not been so blameless but that there was ample foundation for such a charge. And poor May felt that either his life or hers must be sacrificed to this brutal ruffian.

Equinox Tom was watching her closely and a devilish fire glowed in his eyes as he noted the effect of his words. He believed the victory was won, and with a sudden motion he flung an arm around her waist and attempted to press his foul lips to her pure ones.

The maiden struggled helplessly in his powerful grasp, but the dastardly attempt was foiled.

There was a swift rush, a heavy blow, a dexterous thrust of a foot, and Equinox Tom spun through the air, falling heavily over a half-buried boulder a dozen feet away.

A strong arm gently supported the maiden and kept her from falling, then withdrew itself as she regained her balance.

"Tremble not, White Lily," uttered a mellow, musical voice. "You shall not come to harm while Kostoyeak is near."

Faint and unnerved, May Dunwood leaned against the tree-trunk and looked up into the face of the man who had so opportunely come to her rescue. A vague sense of wonder came over her, for in the stranger she beheld an Indian.

Not one of the wild, untamed warriors of the Western desert, in whom it would trouble microscopic eyes to find aught of chivalry toward one of the gentler sex, red or white. The best among them would have been more apt to join in the brutal assault, than to risk aught in defending a squaw; nor is it prejudice that speaks here, as the pages of history, written in letters of fire and blood upon the hearts of thousands, can testify.

Tall and graceful was the Indian, erect and supple in every movement, his limbs and body the acme of muscular development and physical perfection.

Upon his head was a turban formed of a

bright-hued shoulder-shawl. Beneath its folds fell long locks of hair, not of the dead black usually seen upon those of his race, but of a deep, lustrous chestnut, while his eyes were blue, dark and eloquent. His features were regular, clean-cut and not unhandsome. His dress consisted of a bright-colored calico shirt, short sleeved and open at the breast; buckskin pantaloons, gayly embroidered with silk and beads, as were also the moccasins on his feet.

A beaded belt clasped his lithe waist, supporting similarly ornamented scabbards for knife and brace of revolvers.

Equinox Tom, with cat-like activity, recovered his footing, and glared savagely at the audacious being who had dared to interfere in his business—the weight of whose iron-like fist he felt tingling in his cheek, where blood flowed freely from a dented gash.

"Injun, was it you hit me?" he hoarsely demanded.

"Injun slap once—next time mebbe he kick," came the prompt response. "Whisky-bottle think a mule lift him, den—rock him to sleep, sure!"

"Mebbe you don't know who I be—"

"Sharp-shooter know—drunken squaw," promptly.

Equinox Tom laughed aloud at the retort, but it was a bitter, bad laugh, not a sound of honest merriment. Those who knew him best would know what was coming, that bloodshed and death must follow.

"Injun, you've cut your own throat. It's Equinox Tom that says it. Do you know what that name means?"

"Sharp-shooter know—Equinox—big blow—name fit you mighty well."

Sharp and quick came the retort, and out rung the musical laugh of May Dunwood though she would have given much to recall the sound the moment it had left her lips. Equinox Tom amazed at being thus boldly bearded where he had ruled as "chief" so long, was rendered furious by that silvery peal, and with a snarling curse he drew his revolver and—

Swift as was his motion, that of Kostoyeak* anticipated him. Like magic one of his revolvers left its scabbard and flew to a level, exploding on the instant, seemingly without the slightest attempt at aim; yet the leaden missile went unerringly to its mark.

A howl of mingled pain, fury and amazement burst from the lips of Equinox Tom, and as the smoke veiled him, May Dunwood saw him unarmed, shaking his tingling hand like a school-boy after an introduction to the master's ferule.

Well named was the Cherokee, for his bullet had struck the leveled revolver from the hand of Equinox Tom!

"Whisky-bottle dance lively, but heap clumsy," grinned the Indian, his revolver hanging at his side.

Maddened by the taunt—still more by the smile which he saw upon the lips of the maiden—Equinox Tom whipped forth his knife and leaped toward the Cherokee.

Again that lightning like motion—another sharp report, and though Equinox Tom gripped fast the handle of his weapon, the blade, broken by the marvelously directed bullet, spun through the air and clinked against the rocks a dozen yards away!

Despite his brute courage, the bully recoiled, crouching down like some wild beast, driven to a corner, snarling and showing his teeth, afraid alike to advance or retreat.

Half-drunk though he was, Equinox Tom knew that the Indian held his life at his finger end. The wonderful skill which had twice disarmed him, could just as readily have sent the unerring lead through his heart or his brain, and he dared not make a third attempt at revenge.

Sharp-shooter laughed mockingly as he gazed down upon the cowering form, then his face grew stern, and his voice cold and menacing as he spoke.

"Two time Kostoyeak spare your life, not for love, but 'cause he never give the death of a warrior to a dog, when he can help. Next time he not care, mebbe, then you go dead in heap hurry. Safe now, if go away quick!"

"Make him disarm, first," quickly interposed the maiden, "else he will watch his chance and shoot you down from ambush."

"Kostoyeak not afraid, but as White Lily say, so it must be. You hear, Whisky-bottle?"

Equinox Tom grasped the butt of his second revolver, an evil glow in his eyes, but Sharp-shooter divined his treacherous purpose, and promptly covered him. Any attempt to cock the weapon would prove the signal for his death, and sullenly the bully cast the pistol upon the ground.

"He has another—the one he took from me," added May.

"Give a feller time to git it out, won't ye?" growled the defeated bully, pulling the weapon from his pocket and spitefully throwing it at their feet. "Mebbe you'd like to strip me of my clothes, too? Don't be too durned modest—"

* Kostoyeak: in the Cherokee language means "Sharp-shooter."

"Kostoyeak never skin dog," laughed the Cherokee.

"Kostoyeak is a durned fool fer wastin' his bullets as he did," said the bully showing his teeth. "The world ain't big enough fer us two after this day. It's your turn now. Mine come next, an' when I strike, I strike home!"

"Whisky-bottle git bu'sted clean open the next time he cross Injun's trail. Go now—go quick!" sternly cried the Cherokee, pointing in the direction of Red Rock.

Equinox Tom smiled until his teeth showed beneath his bristling mustaches, but there was a menacing light in the eyes of the Cherokee that warned him further delay would be dangerous. Turning upon his heel he strode away, never glancing back while he remained in view.

"You have made a bitter enemy, sir," said May, her voice unsteady as she gazed into the face of the Indian. "Terrible as it is to shed the blood of a human being, I almost regret your suffering him to escape. He will murder you—"

Her voice faltered and she ceased speaking, her eyes drooping and her cheek flushing rosy red beneath the steady, ardent gaze of the Cherokee. She felt a vague fear that in getting rid of one suitor she had found another.

The Indian took her hand in his, and gravely bowed his head over it, touching it almost reverently with his lips.

"Kostoyeak is a man, and can guard his life; he has fear only for the White Lily. That bad man looked on her with fire in his eyes and evil in his heart. But Kostoyeak will watch, and harm can only come to her through his life."

"White Lily may not see him, but he will always be near. If she is in trouble or danger let her call, and Kostoyeak will come. He goes now—but he leaves his heart behind him!"

The Cherokee turned and glided away, May looking after him, awed by the ill-concealed ardor of his concluding speech.

CHAPTER III.

PLAYING A BOLD GAME.

THE road-agents who had Reuben Baker in charge, cut but little time to waste after the departure of Judge Bruno with the stage. Leaving four of their number to dispose of the dead men, they pressed on through the hills at as rapid a pace as was practicable.

At first the prisoner was inclined to be refractory, refusing to quicken his pace, and even threatening to lie a dead weight on their hands, but he had to deal with stern, merciless men, who knew well how to soften the obstinate. And as sober second thought came to his aid, Reuben Baker saw the worse than folly of premature resistance, and quietly yielded.

He believed that his death was resolved upon, in the end, but that he would have a respite at least until Judge Bruno could see him again, and in that interval he hoped to effect his escape.

The course the outlaws followed was rough and intricate, and soon after leaving the stage-road, the eyes of the captive were securely blinded. With one man at each shoulder he was hurried on through the hills for nearly two hours.

At the end of that time the road-agents came to a rude building on the hillside, composed of unbarked logs, the last relic of what had once been a bustling mining camp.

Years had passed since then, but all around were still visible the marks of former occupation, of where buildings had stood, streets run and busy feet had trodden. The face of the hills was still scarred by the pick of the miner. Here and there yawned the gaping mouths of deserted shafts, as though hungry for more of the gold that, in days gone by, had been poured into them—far more than had ever been returned.

The false leads soon "petered out," and when news came of the rich strike made at Red Rock, the little town died in a night, even the buildings being torn down and moved away, leaving the old log cabin sole relic of the past.

Its original proprietors, brothers named Hogan, fared hardly at Red Rock, and souring on the town, returned to the cabin, where they had lived ever since, picking up a scanty living by working some of the deserted mines. So they claimed, and so it was generally believed, though the spot had a bad name, and few diggers would care to put up with the Hogan brothers while carrying much dust about them.

There was a secret reason for their living as they did, but that secret was known only to "the family" until on the evening in question.

Reuben Baker was thrust into the cabin by George Pangloss, the tall fellow particularized by Judge Bruno as the special guard of his prisoner. Drawing a long breath, he exclaimed:

"Durned ef I like this playin' sheriff! Every step I tuck, 'peared like somebody was goin' to bounce me, an' set him loose. 'Tain't the white thing fer the boss to make one man 'sponsible—"

"Lucky he ain't nigh enough to hear ye grumble," growled Ben Hogan, significantly.

"A man kin talk, long as he acts too, I reckon. You cain't tell me nothin' about the jedge

that I don't know a'ready. He told me to keep that critter safe, an' when he comes fer him, he'll be thar, sure!"

"Better go in the hole and keep him company, then," laughed the other Hogan, pushing open a narrow, cunningly-contrived door in the rear of the room, revealing a dark cavity beyond.

"Jest what I 'low to do," coolly retorted Pangloss. "I want some sort o' light, so I kin see an' smoke—"

"Git what you want," growled Ben Hogan. "Puttin' on a powerful sight o' frills, all of a sudden, ain't ye?"

"Orders is orders when they come from a man like the jedge," coolly responded Pangloss, picking up a lantern and assuring himself that it was supplied with oil. "You kin trot out some grub, ef you've got any handy—my bread-basket has bin ringin' the supper bell fer an hour."

Hogan nodded toward a hunk of dried meat which hung beside the chimney, then turned away. Pangloss helped himself liberally, then lit the lantern and pushed Reuben Baker into the opening before him.

Instantly the heavy door closed behind them, but the road-agent appeared in no wise disconcerted. He removed the bandage from the eyes of Reuben Baker, laughing softly as that unfortunate blinked and stared like an owl suddenly cast out from darkness into the noonday sun.

"Rub up your peepers a little, mate," he said, not unkindly. "Afore we settle down fer good, mebbe you'd like to take a squint at your lodgin's. It'll mebbe save us both trouble; you from thinkin' to steal away onawares, an' me from hevin' to set watch onto ye open-eyed all the time. Nothin' like settin' out right at the start."

Reuben Baker felt his heart sink within him at these words, for they told him how little hope there was of his escape, but he said nothing and followed the rays of the lantern as George Pangloss threw them over their surroundings.

Little consolation could be gleaned therefrom.

A hole had been excavated, some thirty feet long by half that in width, connected with the secret door by a short tunnel four feet wide and six or seven feet high. The chamber itself was not much higher, damp and ill-smelling, the roof supported and braced by old plank and rough timbers.

Upon the floor and hanging to wooden pegs driven into the walls were many articles that spoke stronger than words, of robbery and even worse. A broken express box, a mail sack or two, slit open and empty; several bales of goods, various garments and disguises—all betokened the den of robbers under an honest appearing outside.

"You kin see fer yourself that thar's only the one way out o' this," said Pangloss after a thorough search, and Reuben Baker turned quickly toward the speaker, for, strange as it may appear, there was something in his voice that betokened regret or disappointment rather than the sentiments naturally to be looked for from one of the road-agents.

Pangloss met his gaze fully, his face still hidden by the full mask, and seemed to be reading the face of his prisoner by the light of the lantern.

Then he turned away and hung the lantern on a peg near the hidden door, after which he touched Baker on the arm and led him to a bale of blankets at the rear of the den.

"S'pose I was to tell you I am your fri'nd; that I wish you was clear of this hole, an' that I mean to git ye out, ef one man kin do it. S'pose I was to say this; what then?"

"Suppose I were fool enough to believe you?" laughed Baker, his suspicions arising. "And I would be a fool, after the part you have played in bringing me here."

"Could one man have cleared you from a dozen, by open force? Did I abuse you on the road? But let that pass. Try and suppose I am an honest man, who is ready to risk his life—who is risking his life in your behalf, though not wholly from unselfish motives. Suppose this, and then tell me; if such a man should fail in rescuing you, could you keep his secret from those you have no more cause to fear than he has, friend though they think him?"

Rapidly these words were uttered, in a guarded tone, very different from the uncouth language he had formerly used.

Reuben Baker stared at him in mute amazement. He saw that Pangloss was playing a part, but with what motive? Then he said, knowing that his situation could be no worse:

"For such a man, I would suffer the worst tortures deviltry could invent, rather than let harm come to him through me."

George Pangloss bent forward and cut the bonds that confined his arms, then lifted his mask and turned his face so that the full light of the lantern fell upon it—the face of an honest man and one of nature's noblemen, or else the science of physiognomy flatly lied.

A face handsome as that of an archangel, regular in feature, yet strong and powerful; a

face such as one likes to have by one's shoulder where the stake is life against death—the face of a man whom no danger can daunt, whom no odds can change into a craven.

"I put my life into your hands as a guaranty of my sincerity, Mr. Baker," he added, gravely. "One word from your lips would insure my death, for there are men in yonder room who would gladly give their right hands for my heart's blood—to know that Dan Brown, of Denver, was cooped up here like a rat in a trap!"

Reuben Baker clapped one hand over his mouth the more surely to check the exclamation of astonishment that rose in his throat. Yet he could scarcely believe his ears.

A low laugh broke from the lips of the famous detective. Even he was not proof against such flattery as this.

"You have heard my name before, then?"

"Who has not?" earnestly, yet in guarded tones. "I stopped in Denver on my way out, expressly for the purpose of securing your services, believing that they were of more value than the united skill of the best detectives of my own city; but you were gone, no one knew where—"

"No one who would tell where," corrected Dan Brown, with a smile. "I am here on duty, and unless I am greatly mistaken, the trail I am following is one that leads to the very end you are desirous of reaching."

"How can you know that? I have confided in nobody—"

"Yet Judge Bruno knew enough to thwart you, this early in the game. He is a smart fellow, but I overmatched him once, and feel confident of doing so again. Never mind that, now. Time is valuable. Tell me what you care to trust in me, and I pledge you my service if the work does not seriously conflict with the duty I am engaged upon."

Reuben Baker hesitated, but only for a moment. The suspicion that this man, who claimed to be Dan Brown of Denver, might only be an agent carrying out the treachery of Judge Bruno, was banished almost as soon as conceived. But brief as was the pause the detective read it aright.

"I do not wish to force your confidence," he said, quickly. "I mean to get you away from here, to-night, if possible, but I may fail, through no fault of my own. If I should—the worst should happen, I thought you would be pleased to know that your mission would still be accomplished."

"I was a fool to doubt you, even for a moment," impulsively replied Baker, grasping his hand. "But Judge Bruno was so plausible, and fooled me so thoroughly—"

"That you were inclined to set me down in the same category, eh?" laughed Brown. "I don't lay claim to being a saint, but thank the Lord! I am not quite so low down as that smooth-tongued scoundrel!"

"I believe it, and as proof—listen. Sixteen years ago, there lived in New York city, a well known criminal lawyer named Eleazer Trimble. At that time he fell under a cloud—no matter for the exact details now—and was sentenced to State's prison for a term of years. He managed to escape within a few months after his incarceration, and eluded pursuit."

"That same summer, the man who had prosecuted him—a wealthy merchant and until the crime, a client of Trimble's—had a daughter, an only child, of about two years of age, stolen. For years he searched for her, but in vain, and when his wealth was gone, expended in the vain search, he died, broken-hearted."

"He possessed high connections in England, and two years ago, as next of kin, this stolen child fell heir to an enormous fortune—up in the millions, I believe. Of course this set the ball agoing again, and the management of the case was put into the hands of the law firm of which I am the junior member. The details of our work need not be given, but at last we became almost convinced that Eleazer Trimble was still alive, that he had stolen the daughter of his enemy for revenge, that he was to be found at Red Rock, and the missing heiress was living with him, known as his own daughter. To determine this, I came out here—"

"The rest I know," interposed Dan Brown. "The man you are looking for calls himself Elisha Dunwood, and the girl May Dunwood. I learned this while shadowing the man who sent word to Judge Bruno of your coming and your object. Do you remember losing two days in Good-enough?"

"Yes; I was taken suddenly ill, and forced to lay over—"

"Exactly. You drank a glass of drugged liquor," smiled Dan Brown, as Baker stared at him in amazement. "That night your room was entered, your valise ransacked, your papers read and notes taken from them, then carefully replaced. You never suspected this, or that you were drugged again, more powerfully, to insure a delay sufficient for the conspirators to arrange for your coming, but nevertheless it is Gospel truth."

"Why didn't I warn you, if I knew so much? My dear sir, as a lawyer you should be able to answer that question yourself. I was—and

am now—playing a game for big stakes, against shrewd and unscrupulous adversaries. I could not afford to throw away a trick, and at that time I did not know how closely you were connected with my own ends. I only knew that a game of some sort was being put up on you by one of the men I had sworn to hunt down. I felt sorry for you, but to warn you would endanger my plans, and so you must make out as best you could.

"I managed to see the direction on the letter your manipulator sent out, and took the same coach. It reached Judge Bruno, and through my partner in this case, I learned something more of the little game they were playing.

"I ambushed the ambuscaders, hoping to trail them home after their work was done, but fortune played squarely into my hands. One of the road-agents—George Pangloss, as I afterward learned—in obeying a call of nature, came close to my hiding-place. I saw that he was almost precisely my own build and height, and managed to tap him on the head hard enough to still his tongue while I stripped him, leaving my own clothes in exchange. I bound and gagged him, left him in snug cover, donned his disguise and returned to his mates just before the stage came up. The rest you know, or can guess at closely enough to answer all purposes.

If he should escape, and you be caught in here—"

"Salt couldn't save me! But a man in my line of business must expect to run some risks, and as I said before, I am not acting altogether unselfishly. From the racket you gave those fellows, against all odds, you are no slouch, and I need another cool hand in this work. Should it prove that I am right in believing our ends are nearly identical, and I succeeded in getting you safe out of this hobble, will you agree to act only under my instructions?"

"As I hope for salvation hereafter!"

"Good enough!" and the compact was ratified by a warm hand-clasp.

Dan Brown dropped the hand of his newfound ally and leaped swiftly to the hidden door. A faint ray of light which streamed through a cunningly contrived peep-hole in the logs which composed the door, guided him, and with his eye to the aperture, he looked out upon a significant scene.

The noise which had aroused his suspicions was caused by a man flinging wide the outer door, and leaping into the building. He was excited and almost breathless from fatigue, yet a gasping word fell from his lips that electrified his mates.

One of the road-agents, a cool-headed, keen-witted fellow, instantly divined the truth, and leaped to his side before he could say more, one broad palm closing over his mouth as he uttered a warning hiss!

It was at this instant that Dan Brown of Denver applied his eye to the peep-hole. He recognized the new-comer, and realized the full extent of the peril which threatened. For one breath he was dumfounded. He knew he was trapped like a rat, and that never before in his checkered career had he stood nearer death's door than at that moment.

But then his cool and indomitable will regained its natural supremacy, and swift as lightning summed up the chances for and against him.

He heard a slight noise behind him, and turning, saw Reuben Baker advance, his curiosity awakened by the sudden movement of the detective.

He pressed one finger upon his lips in silent warning, then trod lightly to the side of the young lawyer, whispering:

"I'm afraid I've bit off more than I can chew, this time, but one consolation; you'll be none the worse for my failure—"

"What do you mean?" interrupted Baker, anxiously.

"That the Simon pure George Pangloss has just put in an appearance—that's all," quietly answered Dan Brown.

CHAPTER IV.

A COOL HAND.

WITHOUT waiting for any answer to or comments on his startling announcement, Dan Brown of Denver turned again to the loophole in the secret door.

It was hardly needed, but one more glance assured him, beyond the possibility of a doubt, that he had made no mistake; the new-comer was indeed the road-agent with whom he had changed identity for the time being. By some means he had managed to free himself from gag and bonds, had donned part of the garments left with him by the Denver detective, and then made the best of his way to the rendezvous, to undo as far as possible the harm intended by his unceremonious assailant.

The fellow was terribly excited, and this, together with his fatigue after his long and eager race, almost deprived him of speech, but one glance at his face was enough for the danger-sharpened wits of the road-agents, for it told them that a bold and cunning enemy had stolen into their midst, and was now in possession of their dangerous secrets.

Ben Hogan was the first to recover, and made a warning sign to his fellows as he leaped to the side of George Pangloss, clapping one hand over his lips and pushing him back through the doorway.

Dan Brown of Denver caught a glimpse of them as they disappeared from the room, and he saw, too, that the other ruffians had taken the alarm. Each man had his revolver out and hammer raised, covering the secret door, ready to shoot down the audacious spy should he attempt to escape. Not a word did they utter, and the detective believed they were waiting for the return of Ben Hogan, as their natural leader, before making any more decided move.

Turning away from the peep-hole, he touched Reuben Baker on the arm, and led the way back to the rear of the den.

"I'm afraid you'll have to trust to luck and Providence, my friend," he said, quietly. "I counted on getting you out of this hobble, but unless appearances lie, I'm in a worse one myself. You are safe enough, so far as life is concerned, as long as you can make Judge Bruno believe you know something more of importance concerning the case he has taken in hand. Let that be your game, and watch your chance to escape."

"And you?" asked Baker.

"That will depend partly on our friends out yonder. I mean to escape, if they give me the faintest chance. If not—then I'll go under, making my teeth meet in the flesh. Take me alive they never shall."

The words were uttered rapidly, in a tone that carried conviction with them, yet without bearing a trace of gasconade. It was a brave man speaking—one who had coolly counted the odds and was resolved to dare them.

"Come, there's no time to waste," added Brown, at the same time removing his mask and donning a wig and false beard which he produced from some secret pocket in his dress. "Let me tie and gag you again. They won't connect you with my coming here then, and you will not be harmed or ill-treated on my account—"

But Baker drew back almost indignantly.

"What do you take me for? You got into trouble on my account, and now you want me to play a craven's part—"

"You had nothing to do with it," impatiently interposed Dan Brown, putting the finishing touches to the new disguise. "You can stay here in safety. It is me they are after—"

"I'll die first!" exclaimed Baker, with more emphasis than was prudent under the circumstances, but it showed the detective that his companion was resolved to share his perils.

"There isn't time to argue, or I'd try and show you the worse than folly of what you intend. There's not one chance in a hundred of our getting clear with whole skins. If both go under, what of that young lady—"

Reuben Baker was not listening. He took a brace of revolvers from the wall, and satisfied that they were the same caliber, held out his hand to the detective for cartridges.

Pleased by his coolness, while vexed by his obstinacy, Dan Brown furnished him from his cartridge belt, then once more glided to the secret door.

Not more than two minutes had elapsed, and matters outside the den were apparently the same, save that the road-agents, while holding their weapons in readiness for instant use, in a measure masked them, remembering the secret observatory, and the chance that the bold spy might be watching them.

This satisfied the detective that the door had not been fastened behind him, and removed his only doubt.

Turning back, he found Baker thrusting the last cartridge into place, and said:

"Think better of it, friend. The moment that door opens, a dozen revolvers will open fire, and at such short range, death is almost certain—"

"To the first man, yes," coolly interposed Reuben.

"Then you are determined?"

"Yes. See here. I'm no dog, nor yet a coward. You may not have come here wholly on my account, but it was on my account that you ran into this rat-trap. Only for me you would have kept a path open for escape, in case the necessity arose, and that being so, I would be a craven cur if I were to leave you alone to fight your way out."

"Have your own way, but remember I warned you. Keep well behind me when I break out. Dodge for the door, and break for the brush—"

"That'll do. I'm a man as well as you, and I ask no more than an equal chance. We'll draw lots to see which one shall lead the way."

These words, like the others, were whispered, but in them breathed a dogged determination that Dan Brown could not ignore. There was no time for idle disputation. At any moment the enemy might unmask their batteries.

"I've got a button in my hand," added Reuben Baker, extending one closed hand. "Guess—black or white. If you guess right, you lead, if wrong, then I claim that honor."

"White, then," shortly uttered the detective. Baker opened his hand and disclosed the but-

ton—a common black pantaloons button which he had wrested loose to serve as the arbiter.

"You lose, and for once Dan Brown of Denver must content himself with second place," laughed Baker.

No more was said, for just then came a sound from the cabin, and together they glided to the loophole.

The critical moment was close at hand. Ben Hogan and George Pangloss had returned to the room, closing the door behind them, but no locking or bolting it, so secure did they feel of their prey.

Not a word was spoken, Hogan explaining to his mates by signs what position they were to occupy and what to do.

Dividing equally the road-agents stole on tip-toe to each side of the secret door, their revolvers drawn and cocked.

George Pangloss caught up a cloak and with it muffled his face and figure, standing with Ben Hogan beside the table, on which burned a candle.

"Hello, George! George Pangloss! Come out—the boss has sent a man hyar with a message fer ye, 'bout the critters in thar. Show up—it's a heap hurry!" called out Ben Hogan, then turned to his companion and seemed deeply interested in conversation.

It was a cunning trick, well played, and must have been successful even with one as keen as Dan Brown, only for that fortunate glimpse of the man whom he was personating. Even by using the peep-hole, as the spy would naturally do, before emerging, nothing suspicious could be seen, for the ambushed road-agents were crouching close to the wall where they were beyond range of the observatory, while Hogan and his mate seemed careless enough.

"All right—I'm a-comin'!" answered Dan Brown, muffling his lips with his hand to deaden the sound of his voice, then adding in a cautious whisper to Baker. "Better let me go ahead—I've seen more of such work—"

"I won fairly, and claim my rights."

"Then push the door wide open and break for the outside door. Fire along each side of the wall as you leap. I'll take care of those two by the table."

There was no time for more words, and thrusting the log door open with his knee and foot, Reuben Baker darted swiftly into the room, throwing out both arms and firing his revolvers as directed the moment he cleared the den.

Angry yells and curses followed this unexpected movement, and above all rung out a scream of intense agony, telling plainer than words that at least one bullet had found its billet. But the road-agents were men long trained to meet surprises and critical emergencies, and never stopping to make sure that the man before them was the real spy, their weapons echoed back the double report.

The instant Reuben Baker cleared the doorway, Dan Brown fired twice in swift succession as he saw Ben Hogan and George Pangloss lift their weapons. So swiftly that taking aim seemed an impossibility, but neither of the road-agents ever burned powder again. Death-stricken, they sunk down side by side, even as brave Reuben Baker dropped his pistols and spun dizzily around, then fell heavily to the floor that was already sprinkled with his life blood.

Through the film of smoke, Dan Brown saw all this, and saw too that the surviving outlaws were rushing toward the center of the room, in their excitement not noticing but that Baker had fired the fatal shots; and once more his revolver was aimed—not at mortal foe, but sending its unerring bullet at the burning candle, extinguishing the flame and casting the room into darkness save for the faint rays of the rising moon that streamed in at the small window in the end of the cabin.

A roar of wild rage and astonishment greeted this shot, and Dan Brown knew that the outlaws began to realize the truth. As by intuition he realized that any attempt to escape by means of the outer door, as at first intended, could only result in failure. Before he could fling it open, he would be shot down or else crushed beneath the weight of numbers. There was only one chance, slender and desperate, since the slightest miscalculation would result in failure, and that in death or its equivalent, capture—but he unhesitatingly accepted it.

Darting swiftly forward he rose in the air with the lithe grace of a panther, flinging his feet forward and shooting through the small window that was barely large enough to give him passage!

It was a marvelous feat, and the road-agents stood in amazement as the shadowy shape clove the air, momentarily darkening the aperture, then suffering the moonbeams again to enter. But in an instant more they realized the danger that threatened them should this daring fellow succeed in making good his escape, and with fierce cries they rushed out of the death-cabin.

Only an accomplished athlete could have performed the dangerous and delicate feat, and he perhaps not twice in a dozen attempts, but Dan Brown of Denver seemed born under a lucky star.

He passed through the narrow window without touching the sides until his shoulders cleared the frame, but his head struck the upper casing, breaking the skin and tearing off both wig and beard. Still he alighted safely upon his feet, and plunged swiftly into the undergrowth that grew along the hillside, knowing that pursuit would be hot and persistent. The moon shone too clear for him to think of fleeing across the open space where once had stood the lively mining camp, for in a region which was comparatively strange to him, he would be taken at a serious disadvantage.

He had scarcely reached secure cover, when he heard the wild yells uttered by the road-agents as they rushed forth from the cabin, and instantly slackened his pace, lest his crashing through the stiff brushes should give the enemy the clew to his whereabouts. Close before him lay an old prospect hole, caved in and only a few feet in depth, nearly overgrown with brambles and vines. Instantly his course was decided upon. Stooping, he caught up three heavy lumps of quartz, and flung one a few rods down the hillside, crashing through the stiff bushes, then a second and a third, sending each one further than the preceding missile, the last crackling through the undergrowth near the edge of a little ravine that wound around the hill.

The sounds made were very much like those of a person fleeing in hot haste through the thick cover, and the eagerly listening road-agents fell into the snare. Shouting fiercely they rushed after the sounds, while Dan Brown dropped down into the prospect hole and drew the vines over his person.

There was need of this precaution, for the false trail lay in a direct line, and one of the outlaws even jumped across the detective as he lay hidden, slipping as he struck the further edge of the prospect hole, falling to his knees and kicking a shower of dirt and gravel down into Dan Brown's face. Recovering himself with an oath, he sped on after his mates.

The detective was now in little or no danger, and might have lain where he was until all pursuit was given over as useless, but he was not that kind of man. As soon as he felt assured that all of his pursuers had entered the ravine, he arose and leaving the prospect hole, crept rapidly but cautiously back to the cabin.

He had no means of knowing if all of the outlaws had set out in search of him, or whether some were left at the cabin, but he knew that poor Reuben Baker lay there dead or badly hurt, and great as were the interests depending upon his life, he would not desert a friend while the faintest hope remained of serving him.

Brief as their acquaintance had been, Dan Brown was powerfully impressed by the young lawyer's spirit and bravery. He had undoubtedly saved the detective's life by insisting on the lottery after Brown had volunteered to lead the way.

Time was valuable. At any moment some of the enemy might return to the cabin, suspecting the trick he had played them, and taking the chances, his knife in readiness for swift and silent work, Dan Brown leaped in through the door.

No sound followed, no attack was made. The cabin was deserted; tenanted only by himself and those four human shapes lying there in their blood, dimly outlined by the rays of the moon.

Dan Brown knelt beside the body of Reuben Baker, but dare not pause to make an examination there. Lifting it in his arms, he left the cabin, and keeping it in a line between him and the ravine, he hastened away as rapidly as his burden and the nature of the ground would permit.

It was a hard and killing struggle, but Dan Brown never knew the meaning of despair, and at last he rested on the top of the ridge, the body of Reuben Baker lying upon a bit of grassy ground before him. Hardly pausing to regain his breath, the detective bent over the bloodstained form, but then swiftly raised his head, like a buck at the hound's cry.

From far down the hillside came loud and furious cries. The road-agents had missed the body, and knew now how thoroughly they had been outwitted!

CHAPTER V.

CONSPIRATORS IN COUNCIL.

"Some idiots say that no woman can keep a secret, but you can't charge me with holding that opinion, Kate, after this. You hold my life in your fair hands. If the true story was told of how Dandy Briggs was laid out, salt wouldn't save me!"

Judge Bruno uttered this speech, and there was sober earnestness underlying his lightly spoken words. It was a compliment mingled with a thinly veiled threat, or so at least the woman addressed seemed to interpret his words.

"Is it the first black secret of yours that I have held sacred? Has there been a day—a moment, even—any time during the past year and more, that I could not fit a noose around your neck, by simply opening my lips?"

Quietly the words were spoken, but there was

a trace of scorn in them, and the red, ripe lips of the woman curled with disdain as she flashed a swift glance at the judge, then turned again to the man over the back of whose chair she was leaning.

It was early evening of the day on which this chronicle opens. Just at sunset, Judge Bruno drove the stage into Red Rock, the fast stiffening corpse of poor Dandy Briggs lying at his feet. In ten minutes more, the whole town was in possession of the thrilling facts—for Judge Bruno kept within sight of the truth, save in shifting the parts played by Reuben Baker and himself in certain points.

Reuben Baker had shot down Dandy Briggs and attempted to murder him. Judge Bruno had grappled with and flung the fellow through the stage door, then climbed up to the driver's seat and brought off the treasure in safety, killing two of the road-agents while clearing them.

The artful story was swallowed by his audience without a grain of doubt, for the majority of Red Rockers would have doubted the word of an angel freshly descended from heaven as soon as that of Judge Bruno. And that worthy gentleman, as he bowed and retired modestly from the enthusiastic cheers which followed his story, laughed in his sleeve and decided that he had done a good day's work in more senses than one.

But he laid aside his mask an hour later, when closeted together with his particular friends, Craig Kimball and wife.

In outward seeming, three finer specimens of the human race could not have been culled from all Red Rock besides.

Something has already been said concerning Judge Bruno. It may be added now that he was regarded by nearly all as the king, or, more correctly, the father of Red Rock.

Though considerably less than a year had elapsed since he first appeared in town, he from the first leaped into prominence and took the lead in everything. All that he touched seemed to prosper and shed gold in showers. He owned an interest in every paying mine and quartz mill around Red Rock. He opened a banking-house, paying generous rates of interest, and refusing no man a loan. Such was his popularity that at a word from his lips, all Red Rock would have risen in arms to do his bidding, without stopping to ask whether he was right or wrong.

Craig Kimball was only second in popularity to the judge, though he played an almost opposite role. He ran three saloons and gambling-rooms combined, and on several occasions had made good the title given him of a "fire-eater" whose "craw" was well filled with "sand."

He was tall and finely formed, lithe as a panther and powerful as though his muscles were made of tempered steel. A lion like mane of yellow hair covered his head and mingled in curling locks with the luxuriant beard that concealed his face, leaving only his high, bold forehead, big blue eyes and straight, clear-cut nose visible by which to judge his character. But the science of physiognomy is not always to be trusted. Judged by it, Craig Kimball should have been the soul of honor, frankness and generosity; Judge Bruno a somewhat stern but thoroughly conscientious moralist; Mrs. Kate Kimball a true-hearted wife and mother.*

"More because that noose would also squeeze the windpipe of your worthy husband than through any love for me," laughed Judge Bruno, an unpleasant light in his eyes.

"Drop that, or we'll quarrel," flashed Kimball. "A truer woman never drew breath. Say what you please about all others, but let Kate alone."

"Maybe if I was less true, I might be better liked," laughed the woman, but with a hidden meaning beneath the assumed lightness that caused a hot flush to overspread the judge's face.

Kimball noticed this, and turned swiftly toward his wife. She met his suspicious gaze frankly, and bending, pressed her warm lips upon his bearded mouth. She was true and genuine now. Instantly the suspicion died in his mind as far as it implicated her, but his blue eyes flashed menacingly as he turned again to the judge, whose face now told no tales.

"Let that go," he said, helping himself to a glass of wine. "I come here, now that everything is fairly working, to tell you just what sort of a lead I have struck, and how I believe it will pan out for our mutual benefit. You have had some hints already, but now I'll show my full hand."

"You know Old Neb and his little girl, May? Well, if I can make her my wife, I will have the pleasure of handling some two or three millions—two or three millions," he repeated, slowly and with emphasis as Kimball and his wife stared at him incredulously. "I mean all I say. It may run over the larger sum, but certainly is not less than two million. We are making money hand over fist now, thanks to our admirable arrangements, but one word from the lips of that little woman, May Dun-

wood, can give us more than we can make in a lifetime here, even if left alone and not troubled by outsiders."

Mrs. Kimball laughed softly.

"Has Old Neb taken to drinking again, and building castles in the air for his darling to live in?"

"Don't try sarcasm; it spoils the shape of your pretty lips, Kate. There's no 'wild-cat' about my new speculation, and as proof, I am ready to take the whole of it upon my own shoulders—expense and profit alike."

"We are partners in good or bad; that settles it," shortly responded Craig Kimball. "Go on, but put it short. Time I was going the rounds and setting all in readiness. There'll be a big run on the tables to-night."

"Where we can't lose much, and may win heavily—yet playing a square game," laughed Judge Bruno, a somewhat paradoxical remark, that seemed well understood by them all, however. "Well, here it comes in a mouthful."

"Long years ago, Old Neb was a lawyer, living in New York. He was fond of the rosy and the pasteboards even then, and being an unlucky sort of cuss, soon got out of his depth. He turned his pen into a life-preserver, but played the game clumsily, and as a result was sentenced to State's prison for twenty years, a dozen or more forgeries being proved against him. His principal accuser was one Judge Beverley, and Old Neb swore bitter revenge against him. He had it, too."

"He escaped, stole his enemy's only child, and got clear away from all pursuit. No need to trace his life step by step, though I have all the necessary proof and data, enough that Old Neb and May Dunwood are the ones we want, and that an enormous fortune in England only awaits her claiming."

"Sounds fairly enough, but there are other mammoth fortunes, and other eager claimants—"

"There's not a flaw in my claim as you shall satisfy yourself before you invest a single dollar. I'm more than ready to take it all on my shoulders, and have made one move already. I set the chief—"

"Talk of the devil!" laughed Kimball as a peculiar knock echoed at the door. "Equinox Tom himself."

It was indeed the worthy "chief of Red Rock," looking unusually down in the mouth and somewhat the worse for wear, despite the fact of his having drank heavily since returning to the town, to hide that unpleasant truth.

His potations had made him reckless, if nothing else. There was a sullen, ugly glow in his blood-shot eyes as he stood before his master that told the story of his defeat plainer than words. He clearly expected censure, and was more than half inclined to meet it with defiance.

"Not much need to ask what success," said Judge Bruno, keenly eyeing his tool. "One with half an eye can see that you have botched the job; but how even you could do that with such a simple—"

"The devil was fightin' ag'inst me—the devil or a sperrit!" growled Equinox Tom, glancing toward the curtained window, with a slight shudder as though expecting to behold some unearthly object.

This, more than aught else, warned Judge Bruno that he must not handle his tool too roughly, if he ever expected to use him again, and he cut short the mocking laugh that rose in his throat.

"It must be a story worth telling, if you came out second best, Tom," he said, encouragingly.

"I'm bound to tell you three the bull truth, but seventeen mules couldn't draw it out o' me, only fer that. Judge, I've bin licked—clean up an' down licked!" confessed the chief, a ludicrous combination of mortification and stupid incredulity in his countenance as well as voice.

It was no easy task for either of the trio to keep their faces straight, and Judge Bruno hastened to say:

"Impossible! unless, as you said, the devil himself—"

"Either him or one o' his head imps, judge—I won't be sartin which, but 'twas one or t'other, sure! No mortal critter could 'a' done what he did—"

"Begin at the beginning and tell us all."

"It come 'long o' what you told me to do to Old Neb's gal—to watch my chance an' make her think I was red hot onto her trail fer to be my squaw—"

"Exactly: never mind your instructions. We understand that portion. Come to his Satanic Majesty."

There is no need to follow the prolix Equinox Tom word for word. He gave a tolerably accurate account of what transpired after the Cherokee came upon him in the hills, a little exaggerated and tinged with the superstition that was inborn and a second nature to him.

"It looked like a common enough shooter," he added, "but he never tuk no aim, nur yit thar wasn't no smell o' powder in the air—ef anythin', 'twas pure sulphur!"

Craig Kimball had listened eagerly to the bully's story, and such were the strong emotions painted in his eyes that Judge Bruno kept a covert watch upon him from beneath the hand

* For further information concerning this worthy trio, the reader is referred to DIME LIBRARY No. 127.

on which he rested his head. He felt sure that his partner could solve the mystery if he chose, and was arranging a trap in his mind, when Kimball saved him the trouble of springing it.

"A Cherokee, you say? and his name? repeat that."

"Fust he called hisself Kostoyeak, then Sharp-shooter—an' a sharp-shooter he was—ef it wasn't all the devil's doin's," added Equinox Tom, mechanically licking his parched lips as he looked at the wine bottles.

Kimball filled a glass and pushed it across the table.

"Sharp-shooter—that is the meaning of Kostoyeak in the Cherokee tongue. I could almost wish it was the devil, as Tom believed—my scalp would feel safer to-night!"

CHAPTER VI.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

"You know the fellow, then?" asked Judge Bruno, curiously.

"Better than I care to remember," and once more that nervous shiver ran over the gambler's frame.

The judge eyed him keenly, even suspiciously. From what he knew of Craig Kimball, this strong and openly expressed agitation seemed unnatural. Treacherous himself, he was always prone to attribute treachery to others. And yet, what could the gambler hope to gain by playing such a part?

For the second time that hour, Judge Bruno forgot the impenetrable mask he usually wore, and suffered the truth to show itself in his eyes and upon his face. And once more the gambler's wife read his busy brain as clearly as though a printed page.

"Tell him all, husband," she said, strong scorn ringing in her voice, and an angry flash in her eyes as they met those of the doubter across the table. "Already he is hatching a mountain out of a mole hill—"

"I own I am a little curious," interposed the judge, his deep voice toned down, and the mask once more upon his face. "It is a rare sight to see Kimball so powerfully moved by anything, and I am confident that thereby hangs a tale—"

"Then the critter must 'a' had it quiled up in the seat o' his britches," dogmatically uttered Equinox Tom, who had contrived to fill and empty his glass more than once during this scene. "I hold he was the devil, or one o' the devil's lead imps, but fer all that, he didn't war horns, ner yit kerry the sign of a tail, so fur as I could see."

This characteristic interpretation, was exactly what was needed to clear the atmosphere, and in the laugh which followed Equinox Tom's remark, the threatening storm blew over. Craig Kimball seemed more like himself as he spoke.

"A devil of an ugly customer to handle, if not exactly the devil himself, Tom. You'll have to look to yourself, or Red Rock will have a red chief."

"Then he ain't no—"

"He's simple flesh and blood like yourself. I saw him this evening, and no doubt he is in town now, perhaps spreading the story of how he downed you—"

Equinox Tom struck his fist against the table with a vehemence that made the bottles and glasses and lamp dance a jig. All traces of drunkenness had vanished, and there was an echo of hell in his voice that matched well with the lurid glare of his bloodshot eyes.

"Thar cain't be but one chief, long's I draw breath. Injun—man or devil, ef the critter is in town to-night, I'll kill him—I'll cut his heart out an' eat it afore his eyes!"

"Stick to powder and lead, Tom," added Kimball, as the bully turned to leave the room. "Good man as you are, if you give that Cherokee time to draw his gun, you are cold meat! He's had two shots—take yours the instant you can get them—and may Satan guide your lead straight home to the heart of that fiend!"

Equinox Tom nodded and left the room.

Judge Bruno had listened with a frowning impatience that now found vent in words:

"Cards face up on the table, old man, as I have played mine, and no double-dealing. Who and what is this Cherokee over whom you all are making such a to-do?"

"Tell him all, dear," softly breathed the gambler's wife, as Craig Kimball turned with an uneasy light in his eyes to her. "It was for my sake, remember."

"It was a nasty affair all through," muttered the gambler, pouring out a glass of wine and swallowing it at a gulp, "and I hate to recall it just now, when steady nerves are needed; but needs must where the devil drives!"

"Never mind your compliments: about the Cherokee?"

"It was just after the war, then. You know that all of the Cherokees did not leave the Carolinas when the Government ordered their removal, and to this day there are some of them, almost as wild as ever—certainly as bold and warlike, if cornered—among the hills."

"Kostoyeak's family was one of these. His forefathers had been chiefs of the In-e-wah-he-

yah, or Wolf clan, of the Cherokees, and when I first knew him, Kostoyeak, though hardly a man grown, in age, at least, was head chief of the clan. Even then he had gained a wonderful reputation for his prowess at all games of strength and activity, but especially for his really marvelous skill with firearms—hence his name, which means Sharp-shooter. He was the perfect model of a man, and had been given a good education. At times he wore a civilized costume, and then no one ignorant of the fact would even have suspected that his veins carried a trace of Indian blood, for his hair was brown and his eyes as blue as mine. I know that sounds odd in connection with an Indian of pure blood, but tradition says that his forefathers, and indeed the whole family, bore the same distinguishing marks. I know that one other did—his sister, Nacoochee, or the Evening Star."

Kimball broke off to fill another glass of wine, and the neck of the bottle clinked against the glass in his unsteady hand. Judge Bruno stole a swift glance at the gambler's wife, but her great black eyes met his fully, almost threateningly, and his gaze was quickly averted.

"It sounds like boasting to say it, but I was the devil among the women then—before I met you, Kate—"

"I know—go on," and her white hand rested upon his.

The judge's lip curled, and there was a mocking light in his eyes, but his hand hid one, his long lashes the other.

"It was just after Lee surrendered that I first met Nacoochee. A couple of 'mountain boomers,' half drunk, were abusing her, when I interfered. One crawled away with a broken arm, the other lay there until the wolves or buzzards gave him burial, for aught I know."

"Not until it was all over did I even dream of her being other than a white girl, and even then I might have remained in the dark, had she not herself spoke of her descent, for she was nicely dressed and had the blue eyes and brown hair that has ever marked her family."

"Well, you know what we are. No matter what our tongues may say, at heart the best of us refuse to believe in the equality of the negro or Indian with the white race. So it came that I thought it rather a condescension on my part to make love to Nacoochee, though she could name royal ancestors reaching back through centuries, and could command thousands of good dollars, while I scarce knew who my grandfather was, and owned only the clothes on my back and the weapons at my side."

"I don't think I was to blame. Nacoochee was no common squaw—"

"She was lovely as a Peri," murmured the gambler's wife, and Judge Bruno looked at her curiously as he detected a faint sigh—was it one of regret, or of still living jealousy?

"I'm not proud of the story; I'll cut it short," resumed Kimball, his voice hard and cold, no longer dreamy and soft. "Nacoochee flung herself at my head, as the saying goes, and like any other man, I picked her up. She lived in fool's paradise for a few months, then I grew tired. One can't live on honey alone for many days. I always hated a scene, and so forgot to say good-by to Nacoochee before I left, bright and early one morning, only drawing rein when I reached the spot where my old home had stood but was not now—thanks to a visit from the boys in blue."

"Only one house was left standing in the little cluster as I had last seen it—only one farm not overgrown with weeds. Kate's father, as a Unionist, had been spared, and as an old friend of my father, he gave me shelter until I could look around me and shape my future."

"You can see for yourself what Kate is, and for once I showed my good sense by falling over head and ears in love with her, though the old folks seemed to grow colder as we waxed warmer. Then, just as I began to feel confident of winning their consent, as I had hers, Nacoochee put in an appearance."

"It was a dramatic scene, and not a little embarrassing to one in my situation. She claimed that I was her husband, before heaven if not before man—and worse than all, she bore the proof in her arms—a likely baby boy."

"Of course I denied everything—what man placed in such a position would not lie—but I saw that her story had gained credence before I beat a retreat."

"The old gentleman and lady were just a little puritanical in their ideas of morality and honor, and forbade me the house when I returned that evening. I left in a rage, and as Nacoochee waylaid me, I cursed and struck her. But she had her revenge before day."

The gambler paused and again grasped the bottle. Kate bent lower over his chair, her soft cheek touching his. Judge Bruno leaned back, an undisguised sneer curling his lips.

"Nacoochee went back to the house soon after I left, and placed her baby at Kate's feet, saying sadly that as she had taken the father, so she had the best right to the young chief. Then, before any one could suspect her purpose, or raise a hand to stay her, she drove a knife home to her heart."

"Pity all women are not as sensible," sneered

the judge, but the gambler's wife turned upon him fiercely.

"Silence! your tongue is too foul for use against such as she was. Go on, Craig. Pass over what followed, save the part played by Kostoyeak."

"The young chief had been from home during all this—he fought for the South, and wore the gray to Mexico, only returning home when the last hope was dead. You see I give him all credit due."

"Of course he learned all that had happened, and equally of course he hunted me up. Thanks to a warning from Kate, I was ready for him, and when we met at last, I was just a breath quicker on trigger than he was. I carry the scar of his bullet yet, but he fell dead, as I believed then and for long after."

"That was only the beginning. Twice, before I recovered from that wound, I was attacked by Cherokees, one at a time, and only saved by my true friends. I knew then that Kostoyeak either still lived, or in dying had left a vendetta to his people. Every hour my life was in danger, if such was the case, and so I fled the country."

"Not from fear, but because I begged him to do so," put in Kate, jealous of her husband's reputation for courage.

"And bore me company in my flight," added Kimball. "It was a blessed day for me, and I have never yet regretted it."

"No doubt," sneered Judge Bruno, "but what has all this got to do with our present game?"

"Everything. Either Kostoyeak is still alive and on my trail, or else one of his family is dogging me. What Tom said, only strengthens my suspicions. I saw the Cherokee this very evening, and then remarked the resemblance."

"Why not make all sure by a bullet? You could do that, and no one in Red Rock would think of disputing your story, or dream of taking up the quarrel."

"So I would, had the Indian given any sign of recognizing me, but he passed on like a stranger, and I persuaded myself it was an idle fancy. But since he claimed the name of Sharp-shooter, and proved his right to the title, according to Equinox Tom, I begin to fear—You laugh, but that is the word. He may have a dozen or a hundred braves at his back, and his passing me by as he did, is proof that he means to make sure when he does strike. Kostoyeak was surer than a bloodhound on a trail, and if he gets wind of the intricate game we are playing, good-by."

Judge Bruno did not laugh now. After all there might have been something underlying the Cherokee's defense of May Dunwood, more than a desire to free her from a drunken bully. But before he could speak, there came a rap at the door which was clearly made by one of the "family."

Kimball admitted a rough-looking fellow, whose face looked scared and uneasy as the judge turned toward him.

"Some more devil's work, or your face tells a lie—out with it!" he growled, his flashing eyes bent on the man as though he would read his inmost thoughts. "Curse you! you haven't let that man escape?"

"What man did you tell to watch him, when you driv' away from us?" asked the fellow, shrinking back.

"George Pangloss—and if he has betrayed his trust, I'll cut his heart out and make him eat it—"

"George is dead, an' so is Ben Hogan and Dick Burke—but it wasn't George, as you an' the rest o' us thought—"

With great difficulty Judge Bruno controlled his anger, and said, in a low, strained voice:

"Tell your story from the beginning, and mind how you try to deceive me. Breathe one shadow of a lie, and I'll kill you like a dog! Go on, now."

Nerved by desperation, for right well he knew that the judge would not hesitate to carry out his threat to the very letter, the road-agent told a straight-forward story. That three men had been killed in striving to capture the daring spy, was proof positive that they had been deceived equally with the judge by the counterfeit George Pangloss. But when the road-agent came to tell of how they had been so thoroughly outwitted at the last, about the body of the prisoner whom they had shot down by mistake for the spy, Judge Bruno burst into a fury of curses and maledictions.

In the midst of this, he caught sight of the face of Craig Kimball, so full of horror and superstitious fear that his flood of blasphemy was checked.

"Curse you! can't you say something instead of—"

In a husky voice, his throat twitching as though he already felt the noose of the hangman closing around it, Kimball gasped:

"Satan shield us now! Only one of two men could have done that—Dan Brown or Sol Scott!"

CHAPTER VII.

TWO VARIETIES OF "DRAW."

CRAIG KIMBALL was quite correct in his assertion that he had seen the Cherokee who had

so signally worsted Equinox Tom, lounging along the principal street of Red Rock. After first assuring himself that May Dunwood reached her cabin home in safety, the Indian turned and striking the trail of Equinox Tom, followed it until satisfied that the defeated bull was making the best of his way to town. This, with the growing darkness, led him to abandon the trail, but he still glided on until he stood on a rocky crest from whence he could gaze down on the small but prosperous and lively town of Red Rock.

Not a sound came from his lips, though he stood there like some curious statue, the twinkling lights of the mining camp being mirrored in his big, bright blue eyes. Minute after minute passed thus, and the Cherokee seemed debating whether he should descend into Red Rock. The reputation borne by Equinox Tom was nothing new to him, and he knew that should "the chief" be met upon his own dunghill, a fight must follow, which could hardly end save in the death of one or the other.

How this mental debate ended, has already been shown. It was Kostoyeak who passed by Craig Kimball and gave that worthy a shock that unsteadied his hand for hours by his startling resemblance to the young chief of the Bird Clan. But the Cherokee was wholly unmoved by the encounter. Either he did not recognize the gambler king, or had powerful reasons for appearing not to know him, supposing he really was the young chief whom Craig Kimball had so deeply wronged.

Seemingly drawn by curiosity, the Cherokee entered one of the gambling-hells run by Craig Kimball.

It was a spacious building, only one-story in height, but covering a good deal of ground, and was fitted up inside in really fine style for a little mining town, where, as a general thing, luxuries are seldom found or called for. But the reputation of the gambler king had spread far and wide. His banks were run "without limit," and everybody was given a "square deal." Heavy players or light, all were equally welcomed and treated exactly the same. No "decoys" were employed, the dealers were above suspicion, and when a player was "cleaned out," he was never refused a liberal "stake."

It was a policy that paid well. As the good reports spread, lovers of heavy play came from far-off and less favored regions, to "fight the tiger," and thus the tables were kept warm both day and night. Now a gambling table, if backed by funds sufficient to withstand occasional long runs of ill-fortune, must come out winner in the end, owing to the certain percentage in their favor at any regular game, and with Judge Bruno's well-patronized bank as a secret backer, Craig Kimball could laugh at frowning fortune, until she condescended to smile again. But he had another source of profit besides the legitimate earnings of the tables, and even when the players won more than they lost, the bank still came out ahead—a seeming paradox which will find explanation in the proper place.

Thus it came that, early though the hour was, when the Cherokee entered the gambling hall, he found each one of the tables devoted to faro well patronized. His entrance was unnoticed, and his keen eyes roved swiftly from face to face as though he was in search of some particular person.

Whether successful or otherwise could not be told from his countenance, but after a brief pause he moved along and paused close behind the chair of a man who was making more noise than all of the other players combined. The result of each bet was greeted with some remark, exultant or complaining accordingly as fortune smiled or frowned, but always good humoredly and spiced with a certain degree of wit.

That this was suffered by the other players without pointed remonstrance, showed plainly enough that the noisy gambler was no ordinary character, and a close observer would shrewdly have set this unwonted forbearance down to fear lest they should make a bad matter worse.

The noisy gambler was something over six feet in height, and built more for strength than activity, though he possessed a fair share of the last. His back and breast muscles were simply enormous. His head was round and well-proportioned, but too small for his great bulk. His face was liberally scarred, his nose had been broken, and now only showed like a little knot of purple flesh stuck on above his broad, good-natured mouth. The genus "pug" could not have been written in plainer letters, and any experienced ring-goer could have told what Turk Elder—the name borne by the noisy gambler—seemed proud of: that here was an old and often tried pugilist.

"Tain't because I was licked out o' the square circle," he frankly said when explaining his present status in society, at his first appearance in Red Rock, only a few days before the evening in question. "The records 'll show ye that Turk Elder never yit lost a dollar that was put up on his back, but the times ain't what they use to be, when Tom Hyer rocked Yankee Sullivan to sleep. They fit fer honor, then, as much as fer ducats, an' the best man raked in

the stamps. But now—the coves wot loves a mill, loves thar sugar better, and the fight is settled afore a lick is hit, onless somebody offers the "fixed" pug a few more ding-bats, an' he wins on a "double-cross." That's more'n I could swaller. Ef a man kin lick me, all right; but it's got to be did with his mauleys, not with another man's weasel-skin.

"Mind ye, I don't say thar ain't lots o' men in this world, better'n I be, but I never met 'em in a ring, nur challenges, odds nur big money couldn't bring 'em up to the scratch. Many a bar'l o' money we could 'a' rung in, only I wouldn't agree to a 'cross.' An' yar I be—a better man than I ever stripped to step into the ring—most bu'sted, an' obliged to airn my livin' by day's work—when I kin git it."

Turk Elder had "raised a stake" somehow, for though his ventures were small, the shotbag from which he took the coin was well filled. But luck was against him this evening, and so he concluded:

"Durn the game, an' double-durn me fer tryin' to play it when I couldn't tell its head from its tail to save me!" he at length declared, rising up and pushing back his chair. "I wouldn't give one game o' draw poker fer a week o' sech fantastics—"

"Injun play poker, sometime."

Turk Elder wheeled quickly, and stood face to face with Kostoyeak, for he it was who had spoken; yet not altogether the Kostoyeak who had entered the room but a few minutes before. Then every sense was on the alert, every nerve and muscle tightly strung as though he anticipated a sudden and desperate attack. Now, there was a half-drunken leer upon his face and in his sleepy eyes, though he drew his tall form erect with a ludicrous air of gravity as the expugilist quizzically eyed him.

"It takes money to wrastle with poker when a card-flipper o' my boss-power squats at the other end o' the table, Injun. How're you heeled? Got the dust—the argent—the scads?"

"Injun buy you, mebbe, so much a pound," loftily retorted the Cherokee, producing a dirty package of buckskin, out of which he took a large roll of greenbacks. "Dust too heavy to carry—dis good enough fo' Injun."

The keen-eyed pugilist saw that the bills were of large denominations, and clearly genuine. In a moment he came down to business. A good short card player, he held poker to be his best game, and felt no doubt as to his ability to transfer that tempting roll to his own pocket.

Others around him had noticed the money, and were quite willing to accommodate the "boosy" Indian with a game.

"Injun, you're my persimmon, an' the sooner we git to work, the sooner I'll begin to finger them pritty pictures you're so mighty keerless of. Yender's a table."

The Cherokee seemed nothing loth, and the two men were soon seated at a small table near the further end of the room, the Indian occupying a position with his back to the door. It was the chair Turk Elder intended to occupy, but the red-skin was too quick for him. This action was so obviously made for a particular purpose, that the pugilist, wondering, cast a swift glance around them. Then a broad grin overspread his face as he believed he had divined the reason why the Cherokee preferred that position.

At the rear of the room several stationary wash-stands were located, and over each hung a large mirror.

"You're welcome to all you kin see in thar, Injun," he laughed, seating himself. "Hyar's a clean pack o' keards. You kin see fer yourself that the stamp ain't been broken yit."

The Cherokee seemed satisfied and the playing began.

At first quite a little crowd gathered around, having nothing better to do, and their curiosity stimulated by the unusual sight of an Indian in possession of what seemed a little fortune. But the game went on, hand after hand, with little of interest, beyond developing the fact that each of the players had little to learn at the game, and one by one the spectators dropped away, leaving only two or three who had hopes of plucking the flush red-skin after Turk Elder dropped him.

At length their patience was rewarded. The Cherokee dealt. Elder drew three cards: so did the Indian. Elder passed, Cherokee bet twenty dollars, which were covered by the pugilist, whose glittering eyes would have told a keen observer that he held a strong hand. He hesitated, glanced at his hand as if in doubt, then raised the bet fifty dollars. Sober as a judge, and seeming half asleep, Kostoyeak "saw" and "raised" him a hundred more, then gazed with a sleepy smile over the head of his antagonist into one of the mirrors.

Now Turk Elder hesitated in good earnest. The bet was a large one, and the Indian was in no wise concerned. Accounting himself a good judge of character, Elder believed the Indian held an invincible hand, and resolved not to fling good money after bad.

"You outreach me, Injun," he said, sulkily throwing up his hand, while Kostoyeak drew in the pot and tossed his cards on the board.

Elder gathered up the deck, and with a dex-

terous motion faced the hand thrown down. It contained a pair of deuces! An oath of chagrin burst from his lips at this discovery.

"Injun bet big when he git good hand," grinned the Cherokee. "Hab cheek-full-en-two-spots—good hand for bluff!"

There is nothing more irritating to a poker-player than the discovery that he has been "bluffed-off" on a weak hand, and Turk Elder dealt the cards spitefully, inwardly vowing that he would get even for this display of "cheek," as the Cherokee aptly termed it. Until now he had played a fair game, confident in his skill and luck, but he was bent on revenge, and manipulated the cards in his best manner.

Twice his neatest traps were evaded, but then he held a strong hand on the Indian's deal, and bet boldly on it.

Each bet was made good and raised until quite a heap of gold and notes lay on the table between them, the Cherokee smiling sleepily and looking as innocent as a child.

"That see's ye, an' leaves me just erough fer a snifter o' whisky ef I lose," growled Elder, emptying his shot-bag. "I call—what ye got?"

Even as he spoke a startling change came over the face of the Indian. That dull, half-stupid, half-drunken smile gave place to a glow that was almost terrible, and those blue eyes filled with a light keen and alert.

Turk Elder was looking at him expectantly, and shrunk back from that fiery glare, mechanically grasping a revolver. But his suspicions were unfounded. Instead of disputing the matter, the cards dropped from Kostoyeak's hands upon the table, face upward, the top one being an ace.

"The pot is yours—rake it down," he muttered, never removing his wild, piercing gaze from the mirror beyond.

The expugilist needed no second permission, but crammed the money into his shot-bag as quickly as possible and stowed it away about his person. Then, curious to know whether or no the Indian had been trying another bluff, he reached over and spread out the cards Kostoyeak had thrown down, a cry of amazement parting his lips—for he beheld there four aces; an invincible hand, since there had been no agreement that "royal flushes" should count! The Cherokee must know that he had won!

At that moment, Kostoyeak fell heavily backward, almost upsetting the table, while the spiteful report of a revolver rung out upon the startled senses of the players.

Equinox Tom had found his game at last!

CHAPTER VIII.

EQUINOX TOM'S REVENGE.

EAGER to wipe out the stain cast upon his reputation before the whole town should learn of the defeat of Red Rock's chief by an Indian single-handed, Equinox Tom started on the war-path, meaning business all over. At each place he vainly visited, he took a drink to drown his disappointment, and when he at length entered the saloon where his game really harbored, his vision was not quite as clear as it might have been. Still, the brilliant-hued turban worn by Kostoyeak could not be easily overlooked, and as he recognized his game, Equinox Tom drew the revolver on which his hand had rested ever since he entered the room, and with it covered the broad back of the Cherokee.

He remembered the wonderful quickness and skill displayed by the Indian, and the emphatic advice of Craig Kimball—and in his wish to make sure work, he dwelt on his aim a single instant too long.

Kostoyeak was no fool. He realized to its full extent the danger he was daring in thus entering Red Rock and bearding the chief on his own stamping grounds, but the case was one of necessity, admitting no choice.

For several reasons he chose to seat himself with his back to the door, being able to command a view of all who entered, thanks to the mirror beyond. In that polished surface, he saw Equinox Tom enter the room and stare fiercely around, with hand on revolver. Words could not speak plainer, and Kostoyeak knew that the chief of Red Rock was hunting for him.

It was barely possible that he might be overlooked, and it was in hopes of this that the Cherokee acted so strangely about the pot of money he had fairly won. Not through personal fear, but because just then it would be very unwise for him to become a center of attention.

The sacrifice was made for naught. Thanks to the tell-tale glass, Kostoyeak saw that Equinox Tom had recognized him, and as the pistol rose to a level, the Cherokee flung himself swiftly backward, hearing the sharp report and the wicked hissing of the bullet as it passed harmlessly over his head.

Even as he struck the floor, Kostoyeak whirled over on his stomach and his right hand rose clasp- ing a revolver. The weapon exploded on the instant, and a howling curse broke from the lips of Red Rock's chief as he felt the revolver torn from his grasp by the unerring bullet!

Lithe as a panther, Kostoyeak leaped to his feet, his pistol covering the bully, his voice ringing out sharp and clear above the exclamation of the startled gambler:

"You try pull 'nother gun, an' me shoot-plum' center!"

Taken wholly by surprise, the gamblers crowded to each side of the room, leaving the two foemen a clear field for their dispute. All present knew that Equinox Tom, when on the war-path, was not over careful where his blows fell, and on more than one occasion an innocent bystander had suffered from his blind rage. But now, even the most excited could see that the chief of Red Rock was in a bad fix.

Like the finger of fate, the revolver of the Indian covered his brain, needing only a contraction of the forefinger to send its contents home.

Of all, Equinox Tom was the most thoroughly surprised. A dead shot, he saw his enemy fall as he fired, and believed his bloody work done. Instead—once more he was disarmed by a marvelous skill, and his life at the mercy of the man whom he had attempted to murder. Any move to draw a weapon would be fatal, and yet his hard-won reputation as "chief" depended on his coming out of this affair with flying colors.

Fortunately for him, this dead-lock was broken by the abrupt entrance of two men who read the situation at a glance, and swiftly leaped between the antagonists.

"Hold! I'll bore the heart of the man who fires the first shot!" thundered Craig Kimball, and his revolver covered the form of the Cherokee menacingly.

By the side of the gambler king stood Judge Bruno, and he too had his weapon out and in readiness for use.

Matters began to look dark for Kostoyeak, and Equinox Tom's stock took an upward leap.

Pugilist though he was, Turk Elder was a lover of fair play, and besides, felt under obligations to the Cherokee for yielding to him a pot of money which he could not have claimed. So he boldly ranged himself alongside his late antagonist, speaking clearly and to the point:

"Go easy, boss! That critter ahind ye pulled fust on the Injun when he wasn't lookin'. Fa'r play is a jewel, an' Turk Elder ain't a hog to stan' by an' see even a red-skin piled onto by a hull regiment to oncet. Give him a ekil show, man to man, else you've got me to chaw up, too!"

Craig Kimball lowered his weapon, taken all aback, for he recognized the speaker as one whom he had endeavored to use as a tool in the days gone by. His face grew gray, and a hunted light filled his blue eyes—and that betrayed him.

Turk Elder had not recognized the gambler king until he changed countenance; then his memory flashed back to a wild and dramatic scene now nearly a year old, where this man stood a central figure with that same look upon his face—and a low whistle broke from his lips.

"Glad to meet ye ag'in, major," he said, with a short, significant laugh. "Guess my pard 'll hev fa'r play now, with you to run the circus."

"Injun kin make fair play—fight um all—one, two, three—hull gang, for dat matter," quietly said the Cherokee.

"One at a time, then. Don't be a hog, Injun," laughed Elder.

"What's the quarrel, Tom?" demanded Craig Kimball.

"The red cuss shot twice at me to-day, an' now we've hed shot fer shot, so he owes me two yit," growled the bully.

"Set 'em up across the room, an' let 'em blaze away at the word!" cried one of the crowd.

"You hear that? It's fair enough," said Kimball, and there was an order to obey in his flashing eyes, but Equinox Tom refused to recognize it, suddenly replying:

"Look at my hand—it's spattered with lead an' all onsteadied. Would I hev a fa'r show with the born devil, who kin throw lead jest whar he durn pleases? An' me more'n hafe drunk, too?"

"The chief takes water, by —!" came a voice from the crowd, and as he glared furiously in that direction, Equinox met more than one defiant glance, where all before had been meek submission to his lightest whim.

In such a community, the position of "chief" is a delicate one as well as dangerous. The first sign of weakness, the first backward step, is sufficient to raise up a host of claimants. None realized this better than Equinox Tom, and he hastened to retrieve his mistake.

"Give me time to sober off, an' I'll fight him—or, ef his stomach is too hot to wait, I'll fight him now, knives or fists—any way but with pistols."

"Injun ain't hard to suit," and the Cherokee laughed softly. "Kin lick Blow-hard 'most any way. Turn chief into squaw."

Craig Kimball had been watching the Cherokee closely but covertly, striving to set at rest the doubts that troubled him, and now, summoning his courage, he advanced close to the Indian, his revolver hanging at his side, but cocked and ready for an instant shot.

"Who are you? Seems I have met you before."

"Me Kostoyeak—dat Cherokee talk for Sharp-shooter," quietly replied the red-man, unflinchingly meeting his gaze.

Once more the flushed, but of the gambler's

face, and for a moment he felt tempted to risk a shot without raising his arm, but then he saw that the Indian in folding his arms still grasped his revolver, the muzzle of which covered the gambler's heart. Was it by accident or design?

Fearful lest his changing color should betray him, Kimball turned away and sought the side of Judge Bruno.

"It's either Kostoyeak, Sol Scott or Dan Brown," he muttered hoarsely. "I am sure of that, but which one I can't say. He must never leave this place alive!"

"Tom must wipe him out, then. It would raise ugly suspicions were either of us to take a prominent part against him," responded Bruno, with equal caution.

Turk Elder, like a war-horse scenting the fray, was in high glee when the Cherokee made his spirited reply, and only for a grave doubt, would have been perfectly happy. To settle this, he touched Kostoyeak on the arm and drew him a little to one side.

"I glory in your spunk, Injun, but hain't you bit off more'n you kin chaw this time? They say yonder big lummox kin handle his dukes right piert—s'pose he 'cludes to settle ye with them? Ef ye got a doubt, don't be ashamed to breathe it, an' I'll tackle the rooster myself."

Sharp-shooter laughed softly, and whispered a few words close to the ear of the good-natured pugilist. Whatever that communication may have been, it fairly staggered Turk. In open-mouthed amazement he stared at the Cherokee, then laughed aloud as he warmly grasped the red hand.

"Gents, what's the word to be?" he cried, turning toward Equinox Tom and those surrounding him. "Hyar's my pard, ready to prove that your overgrown game-cock ain't nothin' more than a dung-hill duffer, who'll turn tail at the fust touch o' the gaffs. He says he kin lick him from a to izzard, anyhow an' what with he durn pleases."

"Fist fight, an' all fa'r when once we clinch," called out Equinox Tom, ignoring the hints of his backers, who were convinced that the Cherokee, be he who he might, was an enemy of theirs, and who had urged Tom to name knives.

"Stop, job an' git away the best you kin, then!" laughed the pugilist, now in high glory. "An' hyar's bettin' even up that my man comes out top o' the heap!"

Though the undercurrent of sympathy was undoubtedly in favor of the Indian, those present were not even to let their feelings run counter to their interests, and many were the eager acceptances of the bold banter.

"Don't be in a rush, gents," coolly added Elder. "The night is young yit, an' when I git my man sot up, I'll back my 'pinion 'long as my weasel-skin holds out."

Judge Bruno was growing more and more uneasy. From the first he had doubted that the Indian chief whom Craig Kimball so justly feared, had turned up in this out of the way spot, and now that he saw what a sudden change had come over Turk Elder, and how confident he was in the prowess of the Indian, he doubted still more. And he caught those keen blue eyes fixed upon him with such a peculiar look. Surely he had encountered that glance before!

"Either Sol Scott or Dan Brown—but which one?"

Not that it mattered much. Either man was his deadly foe, whose presence meant ruin alike to himself and his cunning plotting. Red Rock was not large enough to contain them both—nor was the world.

"A thousand dollars if you kill that devil!" he breathed in the ear of Equinox Tom as that worthy stripped for the fight.

The eyes of the bully glowed with a savage light. With this additional incentive, little fear but that he would do his level best to maintain his prestige as chief.

"Gents, one word before the dance opens," cried Turk Elder. "This yer's goin' to be the fa'r thing, man to man an' no double-bankin'. Ef my pard gits licked, good enough. We'll grin an' b'ar it as best we kin, but ef my rooster downs your chicken, you've got to chaw the cud o' disappointment in the same way, or else chaw lead. Fa'r play an' no favor is all we ax—an' them we'll hev, or thar'll be cold meat fer breakfast in the mornin', sure!"

Plain talk, but everybody within hearing felt sure that the big fellow meant exactly what he said, and there were a few present among those who feared or hated Equinox Tom, who mentally resolved to take a hand in should any foul play be attempted.

The antagonists confronted each other, after being searched for concealed weapons. Equinox Tom was stripped to the waist, but Kostoyeak had not removed a single article of dress, and this confidence, added to the graceful and practiced position which he assumed, at once put an end to all betting, not a little to the disgust of Turk Elder.

"Two to one on the Injun, an' nobody got the sand to take me up! Durn sech 'fraid critters. Go in, then. Time!"

There was no pretense at shaking hands as the rivals stood foot to foot, sparring cautiously

for an opening. Each man knew that the other meant deadly work if possible, and each was eager for the test to begin.

When this is the case, there is little of that delay so vexing to the on-lookers. A few moments of sparring, then Equinox Tom believed he saw an opening, and shot out his fist with all his power. But the Cherokee swiftly ducked his head, and then planted a lightning blow under the chin that fairly lifted the bully off his feet, sending him over like a falling tree. Blood burst from his mouth and nostrils, but he was tough as a pine-knot, and scrambling to his feet, rushed like a mad bull upon the Cherokee.

Turk Elder howled with delight, for Equinox Tom, confused, laid himself fairly open to another blow, but that howl changed to one of vexation, as the Cherokee let pass the opportunity, and suffered the giant to close with him.

"Break his back, Tom!" shouted Kimball, in delight, for he believed that death alone could loosen his henchman's gripe.

Such was the opinion of most of those present, and as the antagonists wrestled desperately, loud offers of odds on the chief were made without any acceptors.

But the suspense was only momentary. Just how it was done, no one knew, but Equinox Tom's heels twinkled in the air, then he fell headlong to the floor, Kostoyeak adding the whole of his weight, then leaping nimbly to his feet. Not so the other. He lay like a dead man, his head doubled beneath him!

"By the Lord! his neck is broken!" snarled Craig Kimball, rushing to the side of the fallen man.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNANSWERABLE ARGUMENT.

WHO'S to blame but the critter himself? Didn't he say all was fa'r soon as they should take holt?" cried Turk Elder, not liking either the tone or manner of the gambler king. "As fa'r a cross-buttock as ever I see—"

"But he fell on top of the poor fellow—" began Judge Bruno, only to be unceremoniously interrupted in turn.

"S'pose he did? Wasn't it all kivered by the 'greement? Durn sech a crowd as this, whar a feller begins to squeal almost afore he loses!"

"S'pose he don't like, Kostoyeak corral him, too. Lick one, kin lick nudder. Fight 'em all in a row," laughed the Sharp-shooter, but with a cold glitter in his blue eyes that told he meant every word he uttered.

Yet that came near being his last defiance. Craig Kimball arose from the side of Equinox Tom, just as the Cherokee spoke, and the truth burst upon him like a revelation. He had heard a similar defiance from those lips in the by-gone days, and knew that the pitiless avenger had hunted him down. One must die—and flashing forth a long knife, he leaped upon his foe.

An involuntary cry broke from those who were witnesses of this dastardly assault, but not one raised a hand to prevent the murder, save Turk Elder.

He stood on the opposite side of the threatened man, and could not interpose his person in time to ward off the blow. Beyond Kimball were crowded the excited spectators, and instinct told the pugilist that it would not do to burn powder, though his revolver was drawn, for one drop of innocent blood shed might turn the fury of a blind mob upon them.

A man's brain acts quickly in such emergencies, and before Craig Kimball could take a second stride or deal his dastard thrust, Turk Elder hurled his revolver with fearful force, full into the gambler king's face, knocking him over backward, bleeding and senseless.

Sharp-shooter wheeled swiftly at the sound, but even as he did so, his acute ear detected the sharp double-click of a pistol hammer being raised full cock, and turned again with a swift cat-like leap aside.

It was fortunate for him that he did not stop to see from what source this new danger came, for swift as were his motions, a bullet from Judge Bruno's revolver fairly grazed his temple, leaving a livid line to mark its course.

Like an echo rung out the Cherokee's weapon, and the judge felt himself disarmed, his hand tingling with the shock, and bleeding in a score of places where torn by the bits of lead from the battered bullet. And then—was it an earthquake?

Kostoyeak leaped forward and adding the weight of his body to the blow, knocked the judge end over end into the panic-stricken crowd.

It was only his fist that he used, but the strong man lay where he fell, quivering convulsively in every limb, just as a hog that has felt the weight of the butcher's hammer.

Craig Kimball was the first to recover his senses, and staggered to his feet, his face one mask of blood, his nose broken and both cheeks laid open by the missile, his beauty of face forever ruined. But he did not think of that now. A hell of fury and hatred was raging in his bosom. He dashed the blood from his eyes, and glared around in search of his enemies; but he looked in vain. Both Kostoyeak and Turk Elder had vanished.

"A thousand dollars to the man that points them out!" he screamed, spitting out blood and loosened teeth as he spoke. "A thousand dollars for each one—dead or alive!"

When powder began to burn and lead to whistle, the spectators made a headlong rush for the door, or dived under the tables to get out of the way of danger, but now they were returning, but cautiously and holding themselves in readiness for retreat should the occasion demand. They heard the magnificent offer, and instantly their fears were lost sight of by the majority. For that amount they would have hunted down their best friend, and with loud yells they drew their weapons and rushed out of the saloon.

Little mercy need either Kostoyeak or the pugilist expect should they be overtaken that night!

As they cleared the room, Judge Bruno groaned and sought to arise, his eyes opening with a dazed and stupid stare, his brain still fuddled by that terrific blow.

At nearly the same moment, a low sound came from the lips of Equinox Tom, proving that the fears of his patrons had been without foundation.

Kimball glanced first at one, then the other, as though in doubt which one to pay attention to first, but then as his own hurts began to smart and sting, he staggered to the back of the room and freely applied cold water.

He was thus engaged when Judge Bruno came to him. In a few words he told what he had done; that a score of men were out in hopes of earning the blood money.

"Give me your arm and help me home," he added, thickly, through the folds of a handkerchief with which he had bound up his face. "Kate can fix me up best. Tell Stevens to look after Tom, and send us word if they catch those devils."

The bar-tender, Stevens, received his instructions from the judge, and then the twain made the best of their way to the house of the gambler king.

Kate Kimball was still up, and though her face turned as pale as death at the sight of her wounded husband, her hands were steady and tender as she cared for his hurts. These looked far worse than they really were; that is, they did not threaten the gambler's life, but he and she knew that he would bear those scars to the grave.

"Hell's curses light on them both!" he growled in deadly hatred, as his wife fastened the last bandage in place. "I'd give a year of my life to have one fair blow at them!"

Judge Bruno laughed bitterly.

"I see that, and go ten better! While that painted bloodhound lives, a rope is round our throats—"

"You think he is disguised—that it was Sol Scott or Dan Brown of Denver?" muttered Kimball.

"Give us some liquor and cigars—then we will excuse you, Mrs. Kimball," said the judge, not answering his mate.

"You are not my master—" began the woman, spiritedly, but Kimball raised his hand in warning.

"Do as he says, Kate. Get what he wants, then go to bed. We've got a good deal to talk over that is not fit for your ears, just now. Go—I'll be with you before long."

His voice was gentle enough, but there was a light in his blood-shot eyes that the woman knew of old. When in that humor, he would not be denied, and without a word she obeyed, retreating to the inner room and closing the door, after placing wine and cigars on the table.

Both Kimball and the judge sat in silence for a long time, the former moodily thinking, the other smoking and drinking heavily. Few of their acquaintances in Red Rock would have recognized them now, for the carefully worn masks were dropped, and their worst natures shone forth.

"You heard what that devil, Turk Elder, said?" growled Kimball at length. "He called me *major*—"

"Only after that Cherokee whispered in his ear," and Bruno laughed shortly. "Was it all a lie—that about Kostoyeak?"

"It was true, every word, just as I told the story. I believed the young chief had hunted me down, after all these years, and I half believe it yet!"

"Then you're a blinder fool than I took you to be! No Indian ever drew breath who could do what that fiend did, this night. Ugh! I'd rather have a mule kick me!" and Judge Bruno gingerly fingered his swollen throat.

"If either Dan Brown or Sol Scott, then we are hunted down—our lives ain't worth a dollar!" muttered Kimball, casting a nervous glance around him, then pouring out a glass of liquor and swallowing it with difficulty.

Those who may have read the preceding volumes of this series, have recognized these two worthies, and recalling the past, can readily believe the truth of the gambler king's last assertion. To new readers, a brief explanation may not come amiss.

One year before, a band of road-agents,

known as the "Owls" from their peculiar disguise, were broken up by Dan Brown of Denver, the Rocky Mountain Detective, aided by a wonderful athlete and man of mystery, known as Sol Scott. Craig Kimball, then known as King Carmichael and "Major Owlet," chief of the road-agents, but whose real name was Fergus Randolph, was taken prisoner and conveyed to New York, there to answer for the murder of General Watkins Cowperthwait. He was tried and sentenced to death, but was enabled to escape, thanks to the gold and devotion of his wife. Eluding pursuit, he finally settled down in this remote mining town, where fortune had smiled upon him until now.

Judge Bruno was a criminal of no less deep dye, and had been captured at the same time. He was sentenced to State prison, but also escaped, and falling in with his old ally, had entered into partnership with him once more. He too had bitter cause to fear and hate both Dan Brown and Sol Scott, and were his present suspicions correct, death alone could end the perilous game. But he was made of sterner stuff than the gambler king, and was resolved to fight to the last gasp.

"Our lives or theirs, you mean. Turk Elder must be disposed of too. Now that he has got hold of the clew, he will have little difficulty in unraveling the work we have been at so much pains to piece together. We must set the boys on their trail, and let everything else drop—"

"You can do what you please. I've had enough of it!"

"What do you mean?" snarled Judge Bruno.

"Just what I say," doggedly replied Kimball. "Play the game out, if you are resolved to do so—but you can play a lone hand. I mean to draw out while I can."

Judge Bruno leaned over the table, breathing heavily, his black eyes glittering like those of a rattlesnake. If ever the father of evil looked through the orbs of man, it was now.

But Kimball met his threatening gaze unflinchingly.

"You can't scare me with black looks, Don Farrar," he said, determinedly. "In the way you want me to go, I see the shadow of a scaffold, and I can feel the noose tightening around my throat. I believe those bloodhounds have scented us out, and I mean to get out of this before they pull us down. Unless you are mad you'll do the same."

"One bold stroke may win us all—wealth of kings, and freedom forever from those bloodhounds. We can set the boys at work. They will run the hounds down, and silence them forever. And yet, knowing this, you mean to back out and ruin all by running away?" slowly said Bruno.

"I've heard talk like that before, now," doggedly. "Neither Dan Brown nor Sol Scott are men—they are demons! How many times have we felt sure that we had triumphed over them, only to have them turn the tables? Four times Dan Brown has been pronounced dead and buried—but he is still alive, and more dangerous than ever. Say what you like. With those two men, or either one of them against us, we are doomed if we try to fight them. But as I said, do as you like. For me, I mean to leave Red Rock this very night!"

"One week will finish all. In that time I can make May Dunwood my wife. By then I can turn all that is in my bank into portable shape. We can flee, then, if you like, and take with us more money than either ever dreamed of possessing before. But if you desert me now, when I most need your help—"

"I value my life higher than money. I have enough to live on comfortably, until I can strike a new lead. You may as well spare your breath—would you murder me?"

Swift as thought Judge Bruno thrust a cocked revolver across the table, its muzzle staring Craig Kimball full in the face!

"Not a word!" he uttered sternly. "Try to give the alarm, or to draw a weapon, and I scatter your brains over the floor! Take back your words. Swear by all that you love, you will not desert me—swear to stick by me and aid me in my plans, or you die like a craven cur!"

It was truly an unanswerable argument!

Kimball saw that the judge was not speaking idly. He knew that death was inevitable if he refused to take the oath or attempted to escape in any manner. And into his eyes there came a look of unutterable horror—yet his eyes were not fixed upon the judge or his weapon, but glared over his head, as though they beheld some horrible phantom!

CHAPTER X.
"CORRALED."

JUDGE BRUNO laughed, low and mockingly as he noticed this expression of horror deepen on the face and in the eyes of the gambler-king. He shortened his arm and drew back the threatening weapon a few inches, guarding against any desperate effort to grasp or knock it aside.

"Come, that trick is too thin to play on an old hand. Give me your answer, and be in a hurry, too! Swear that you will see me through with this—swear that you will back me up in all that I may attempt—"

An open hand shot swiftly past him and grasped the revolver in such a manner that the hammer could not strike the cartridge as it fell, and at the same instant another palm was pressed firmly over his mouth.

"Keep mighty still, now, or you git plugged, sure!" uttered a clear, even musical voice, and as the speaker glided around the table, Judge Bruno recognized the Cherokee.

The look of despairing horror which he had noticed in the eyes of Craig Kimball but a moment before, and which he believed was a foolish trick to throw him off his guard now came into his own face.

Be he Dan Brown, Sol Scott or only Kostoyeak, the Cherokee, Sharp-shooter stood with a revolver in each hand, the silver drops covering their brains, holding their lives at his fingertips. Nor did he lack at least one skillful confederate, for that strong hand wrested the revolver from Judge Bruno's grasp, and the mate to it slipped from his lips down to his throat, the sinewy fingers closing around his windpipe as snugly and suggestively as a hangman's noose.

"Utter a word—a sound above your breath before you are bidden to answer the questions asked, and you die that instant!" a stern voice uttered so near that he could feel the breath that accompanied them fan his ear.

A voice that he recognized with a spasm of fury and hatred—the voice of one whom he had treacherously betrayed and delivered into bondage—of whom he had hoped was dead; the young lawyer, Reuben Baker!

Though death stood before and behind him, the love of life yielded to this mad impulse of desperate hatred, and his nerves stiffened like steel cords and bands as he resolved to risk all on one bold attempt to turn the tables.

He forgot that the hand of his enemy was upon his throat, that the sensitive finger-tips could read the truth in his swelling muscles, even as a skillful operator can interpret the movements of his electric instrument without the aid of eyes or ears, and his desperate design was discovered as soon as formed.

Like a vise those sinewy fingers contracted, and with a force which even his great strength was powerless against, Judge Bruno was drawn backward so that he could see a glittering blade poised above his heart, while no less gleaming eyes looked down into his, cold and menacing.

"Fool!" hissed the stern voice, "are you tired of life? Dare to struggle, and I send this blade home to your black heart!"

The strained muscles relaxed, and for the moment that strong man lay in the grasp of his enemy as helpless as an infant. Not alone through fear of death; but that stern face, those gleaming eyes, had their counterpart over behind Craig Kimball. Here as there stood Kostoyeak the young chief of the Bird Clan! The face and eyes of the Cherokee—the voice of Reuben Baker!

Low and mockingly he laughed, but still held his knife hovering above the heart of the judge as he spoke:

"Make sure of your game, Kostoyeak."

From the first Craig Kimball sat like one stupefied. He felt that an avenging fate had at last overtaken him, and against which it would be useless for him to struggle. He offered no resistance when the Cherokee twisted his arms behind him and clasped a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists, then drew the loaded revolvers from his person and placed them on the floor beyond reach.

This done, he turned and served Judge Bruno in the same manner while that bit of steel still hung menacingly over the man's heart. Again that taunting laugh when the click told that the manacles were fairly adjusted.

"Many thanks for your polite consideration in giving us no more trouble, gentlemen," and the red man who spoke with the voice of Reuben Baker, moved around and rested with one hip upon the end of the table. "Continue to act as sensibly through the remainder of this interview, and you will have no cause to regret it. But bear this in mind. Your lives are safe only during your good behavior. At the first outcry, you shall taste steel, as deeply as my hand can drive it."

Slowly the courage of Judge Bruno was returning. More than once before this had been in an equally tight fix. As often had he escaped—surely his patron saint or devil would not desert him now!

"You are no Indian," he uttered slowly, his keen eyes striving to read the truth in the face before him.

"Am I not?" and the man with the voice of Reuben Baker smiled until his white teeth gleamed between his red lips. "Have you the same opinion, Craig Kimball, *alias* King Carmichael, *alias* Major Owlet, *alias* Fergus Randolph? Am I an impostor, or am I Kostoyeak, chief of the Cherokee Bird Clan, brother Nacoochee, the Evening Star?"

The muscles of the gambler king's throat swelled, but only an inarticulate sound escaped from his muffled lips as his fear-distended eyes roved from one dusky face to the other.

The man at the table laughed softly.

"Kostoyeak is here, but I am not he. Are you blind, Judge Bruno, *alias* Paul Gerux,

alias Don Farrar? On my head is the raw wound made by your revolver, only a few hours ago, when you, like a fool traitor, struck me down with a dastardly blow behind my back. You won then—now it is my turn. You robbed me—now I come to claim my own."

As he spoke, the man in disguise made a slight gesture, and his comrade deftly opened the coat of the judge and took therefrom a well-filled notebook, passing it across the table.

"Watch them. At the first restless movement, send your knife home," added the leader, opening the book and carefully examining each paper it contained.

Judge Bruno trembled with fury, but an iron grasp was upon his shoulder, and the keen point of a knife rested directly over his heart. He dared not yield to his rage, for life is as dear to the criminal as to the honest man.

One by one the papers were scrutinized, and at length the man closed the note-book, laughing exultantly as he stowed it away in the bosom of his hunting shirt.

"Turn about is fair play, judge. You surprised my secret—now I have several of yours in my possession. From this time on I hold your life in my hands. One word from my lips can bring you to the gallows! And whether that word is spoken at once, depends mainly upon you."

"What do you mean?" muttered the judge, hoarsely.

"Just this. You have been plotting against an innocent girl; you must abandon your plans. Dare to molest her by word or deed, and I swear to put the hangman's noose around your neck. You opened the ball, and now I mean to fight fire with fire. From this moment you are a hunted man—you and yonder craven. Not a word can you speak that will not be brought to my ears, almost before it grows cold on your lips. Not a step can you take but I will know it. At the first sign of flight you will be arrested. You may call on your bullies, your cut-throats, your secret stabbers, but even they cannot save you. You may kill or cause me to be killed; from my ashes will rise an avenger. Ay! though you and yours slay a hundred, one by one, others equally true and persistent will take their places."

"Bah!" and all the native audacity of the evil man shone forth in his powerful face. "If you possessed such powers you would act, not talk. You can kill me now; but that is the extent of your power, and for every drop of my blood, an armed hand will be raised against your life. By killing me you doom yourself."

"And if I do not choose to slay you? If I let you live?"

"What will I do?" laughed Black Bruno. "I can tell you what I will not do. I'll never attempt to run away."

"The only course that can prolong your miserable life. You are doomed as surely as though you stood pinioned and with the black hood drawn over your eyes, your throat encircled by the noose and the executioner's ax falling upon the rope that alone holds the scaffold trap in place—but I mean to play with you as a cat toys with a helpless mouse. You shall live on, expecting the blow to fall with each passing moment—and thus suffer death in anticipation thousands of times over. You smile. Let the future prove my words."

Ceasing, he made a slight gesture. Instantly Kostoyeak produced a slender but stout rope from beneath his calico shirt, and kneeling, bound the feet of the judge together with one end, then stretched his legs at full length beneath the table. Those of the gambler king were treated in a like manner, then bound firmly to the feet of his fellow captive.

"One more precaution, just to guard against your injuring your lungs by shouting for help," laughed the leader, as Sharp-shooter arose. "Be kind enough to open your mouth."

It was a terribly bitter pill, but the judge dare not refuse. He was entirely helpless, and while a loud outcry might possibly bring help, it would surely come too late to save his life. So, though his eyes flamed with fury, he yielded to the inevitable, and was securely gagged.

"Adieu, gentlemen!" with a mocking laugh. "If you have enjoyed this little visit one half as much as we have, then the memory will linger long ere it be forgotten! I beg of you, do not injure your health by sitting up too late over your wine. 'Tis time all honest people were in bed and asleep. Farewell—until we meet again!"

With noiseless tread the two strange beings entered the bed-chamber, and closed the door behind them.

Craig Kimball, his eyes almost starting from their sockets, listened in helpless agony, his own torture forgotten in terrible fears for his wife. It was the one redeeming point in his character, this love for the beautiful being who had sacrificed all that women hold precious for his sake.

But not a sound came from beyond that barrier. Kate was a light sleeper. Surely she must have been aroused by the entrance of those mysterious fiends—unless—God of mercy! had they murdered her?

That horrible fear proved too much for his

overstrained nerves, and for the first time in his life, the gambler fainted.

Judge Bruno would have laughed aloud as he saw the head of his partner in sin fall forward upon his breast, but that the stout gag between his jaws forbade. In his malicious soul he was glad that his own torture was exceeded by that of another. He read that look of terrible dread aright, and he hoped that the truth would even surpass the wretched gambler's fears.

Slowly the time dragged along, each minute seeming an hour to the inwardly raging judge. He was eager to be on foot, to prepare a return blow for his enemies, and knew that every moment lost thus was aiding them, injuring his hopes of vengeance.

Nearly two hours—an age—thus dragged by. Craig Kimball had recovered his senses, but looked more like a dying man than his usual self. At the end of that time there came a low, peculiar rap at the door that both of the bound men recognized. Judge Bruno's eyes flashed vividly, and he strove hard to shout aloud, but only a hoarse, rumbling sound came from his lips.

Fearful lest the man without should go away, he flung himself heavily to one side, upsetting the table and all its contents with a frightful crash. The light was extinguished, but his ends were gained.

One thrust of a powerful shoulder burst the outer door open and let in a flood of moonshine, revealing the brawny form of Equinox Tom standing on the threshold, his revolver drawn in readiness for use.

By a superhuman effort Judge Bruno raised himself to a sitting posture, where the moonlight fell upon his face.

A wondering cry from Equinox Tom told him that he was recognized, and quickly a keen knife severed the thong that held his gag in place.

"Quick—my feet!" he gasped, huskily, then rose erect the moment his limbs were in freedom. "Set him free, then try and get these cursed irons off my wrists. The devil's own game has been played here to-night!"

The instant Craig Kimball was set free, he rushed into the bed-chamber. A faint light streamed in through the open window, revealing his wife lying upon the bed, looking like a corpse. A cry of bitter agony burst from his lips, and he staggered against the bedside like a drunken man.

That sound caused Judge Bruno and Equinox Tom to enter, a harsh laugh breaking from the former; but his devilish exultation was short lived. His keen sense of smell detected the truth, and he snatched a cloth from where it lay upon the bosom of the woman, and raised it to his nostrils. A faint scent of chloroform still lingered about the fabric.

"Rouse up, you weak fool!" he growled, shaking Kimball by the shoulder. "Nothing ails Kate but a little chloroform."

The gambler stared at him blankly, but then as he comprehended the glad truth, he knelt beside the bed, his head bowed upon the bosom of his wife, hot tears streaming from his eyes, his frame shaken by strong sobs.

Judge Bruno uttered a fierce oath, and clutched his shoulder.

"Come—rouse up and put off playing the ass until a more suitable time. There's work to be done—those mocking bloodhounds to pay back in their own coin!"

CHAPTER XI.

GOING A-WOOLING.

APPARENTLY the will of the gambler king had been utterly crushed by all he had undergone, for he arose and stood before his iron-nerved confederate, mute and submissive. But this was only outwardly, for when Judge Bruno, still maintaining his grasp, moved toward the other room, his hand was flung aside with feverish force.

"Leave her alone, dead or dying? Never!"

Judge Bruno cut short a grating curse, and only the knowledge that he needed the aid of this man in developing his intricate schemes, kept his clinched hand from black and deadly work at that moment.

Equinox Tom, ignorant of all that had led to his finding his patrons in such a precious pickle, stood by in open-mouthed amazement, unable to comprehend aught that he saw or heard. But he knew that the present was no time for asking questions, and when Judge Bruno turned upon him, eyes flashing, teeth grating, he listened mutely.

"Go find such of the boys as may be in town, and set them on the look-out for two men disguised as Cherokee Indians—like the one you tackled in the saloon—both with blue eyes and brown hair. Kill or capture them if it can be done surely. If not without too much risk, dog them to their dens. Go—but come back as soon as you set the boys on the trail."

Equinox Tom left the house without a word. Never before had he seen the mask wholly lifted from the face of his patron, and strong, reckless man though he was, his flesh crawled as he hastened away from the glitter of those devilish eyes.

"Now, Kimball, brace up and be a man," said the judge, schooling features and voice as he turned to the gambler, who was lying half upon

the bed, pressing his lips to the cold brow of the only being on earth whom he loved. "I tell you there is nothing to fear for Kate. She will be up and about, lively as ever, in an hour or two, as soon as she sleeps off the effects of that chloroform. It is our lives—yours and mine—that danger threatens, and every moment we waste here only increases that peril. Do you hear—can you understand me?"

The truth was slowly breaking in upon the brain of the gambler king, shaken as it had been by that terrible blow, followed by the intense strain of the after events, and there was more of the light of reason in his eyes as he looked around at his comrade in crime.

Judge Bruno noted this, and crushing down his angry impatience, he convinced Kimball that he spoke the truth.

"You heard what that crafty devil said," he added, when Kimball swallowed the heavy draught of liquor forced into his hand. "A good portion of it was empty boasting, of course, but those two rascals know too much for our safety. They must be silenced, and you must help me do it."

Judge Bruno spoke decidedly enough, but there was an anxious glitter in his eyes as he waited for the gambler's answer. Would he yield, or would he again declare his intention of abandoning all for flight?

Kimball hesitated, and the judge added:

"We were both fools, to suspect Dan Brown or Sol Scott of having a hand in the game; that is proven by the botch they made of it. You know that neither of them would have loosened their grip when once they had us foul. By this time we would have been out of Red Rock, on our way to the gallows!"

"The one that took the lead, was Reuben Baker, that sprig of a lawyer who came out here in search of May Dunwood. I recognized his voice, and through the paint on his face I noticed a mole that satisfied me. As for the other—he may be the Cherokee chief, and a tough customer as we all found him, but neither you nor I need fear to tackle him, now that our eyes are fairly open."

"If I only knew you were right—"

"Right or wrong, what can we do but fight it out?" impatiently interrupted the judge. "You're not the man I think you, if you can desert your wife, and she will not be fit for travel for hours—and if those bloodhound detectives are really on our track, you can only hope to throw them off by making a midnight flitting. Turn and fight them boldly, and we must win. Turn tail, and they will nab you sure. Here, our words will outweigh any proof that can be brought up against us. Red Rock is ours. What we say, will be done. Here we are all powerful—if we run, we have only our own hands to do the work our wits plan."

Much more the fluent judge said, but it need not be recorded in detail. Enough that he convinced the gambler, and as Equinox Tom returned from his mission, he found the two men clasping hands over an oath to fight their enemies to the bitter end.

A rat could hardly have escaped the search that was made through the rest of that night, by the judge and his allies, but nothing was seen or heard of the two bold men who had played such an audacious part in that night's work. Like grim phantoms they had come and gone, and even Judge Bruno secretly owned that the job bade fair to prove a difficult one to carry through triumphantly.

The Sabbath morn dawned bright and beautiful.

Few persons who saw Judge Bruno leave his hotel that morning, would have suspected the trying scenes he had so recently figured in. Outwardly he was bland and smiling, his face clean shaven, his linen snowy white, his broad-cloth fresh and speckless, his boots shining like ebon mirrors. Inwardly—his black, crime-stained and sin-hardened heart was fairly seething with evil passions.

Every one he met, was greeted with a bland smile and bow, but careless as he seemed, Judge Bruno was on the alert. His keen eyes scanned every face and form, every spot where an enemy could possibly be lying in ambush, and though he bore no visible weapons, a very different tale would have been told had he met either of the men for whom he was keeping such a close look-out.

He passed through the little town and struck out into the picturesque hills which formed the background. Here he quickened his pace, and now that there was no particular need of keeping up appearances, one hand clasped a revolver-butt as his eyes roved restlessly around him.

Nestling upon a little plateau not far above him, he at length caught sight of the log cabin where Old Neb and his daughter lived. Even as he looked, he saw the dainty figure of the maiden near the house, saw her glance in his direction for a moment, then turn and glide rapidly away from the cabin, disappearing from view.

An ugly light flashed into his eyes, and his strong teeth grated together like an angry boar champing its tusks.

"Running away at sight—dainty little devil!"

he snarled. "But the time will come—and soon, too! I'll tame your spirit if I have to break your neck!"

Evidently the judge was not one who played the hypocrite when only himself could be edified by the exhibition.

In a few moments he reached the plateau, and entered the cabin without the formality of knocking, laughing softly as an old man who had been dozing over the little fire, leaped erect, fear written in every feature, his skinny hand claspings a knife as he confronted the intruder.

"Go easy, my friend," said the judge, smiling.

"I must have been dreaming—I thought—"

"That the hangman was paying you a visit, instead of an old friend making a social call," laughed the judge, seating himself and laying his silk hat on the table. "My dear fellow, you must 'taper off'—you are ruining your nerves."

"Don't—don't mock me!" sharply cried the old man, a flash of his youthful fire filling his eyes. "You know it is not that—you know that it is the want of liquor—one glass would set me up again, would string my nerves—"

"Then why don't you take it, man? Surely you are of age!" and Judge Bruno took a silver flask from his pocket and shook it lightly, the contents gurgling musically.

"Back, devil! hide it—put it away, out of sight!" gasped the old man, averting his head and trembling in every limb, while his body seemed to lean toward the flask as though drawn by a powerful magnet. "Put it away—you know I have sworn never again to touch a drop. You know that I am a devil when I taste it—put it away, or I'll kill you like a dog!" and once more he faced the judge, his eyes aglow, the keen knife quivering in his bony fingers.

"Just as you say," was the indifferent reply, and the silver flask disappeared. "How was I to know? You look like one just getting over a big drunk, and I thought that a hair of the dog that bit you might work a cure and brace you up."

Indeed the old lawyer did look a perfect wreck. Tall and bony almost to emaciation, his form was bowed and trembling. His face had once been handsome, his head was still a grand one though the bronzed skin clung to the bones like weather-beaten parchment. Strong drink had been his ruin. Even now his mouth was watering, and his fingers convulsively twitching as though itching to clasp that flask.

"I said I came to pay a social visit, but that is only half the truth," said Judge Bruno, his tones smooth and even musical, his outward appearance that of a saint on earth. "Your daughter, Miss May, is not at home?"

"She must be somewhere near; we have few neighbors, as you know," and Old Neb laughed shortly.

"It does not matter, at present. My business concerns her, but it can, perhaps, be best transacted through your medium."

The old man fidgeted uneasily in his chair, and his sallow, sunken cheek assumed a tinge of red. Clearly he had an idea of what was coming, and just as plainly he was not eager to hear it. Judge Bruno saw this, and showed his white teeth in a cold smile, but his voice lost none of its smoothness.

"There is no need for old and firm friends as we are, to beat around the bush. You cannot have forgotten the hint I dropped at our last meeting. Since that time, you have had ample opportunity to consider the matter in every light. Now I put that hint into plain words. I love your daughter, I wish to marry her. What is your answer?"

Blunt and straightforward enough, in all conscience. Not one superfluous word, yet covering the whole ground.

The flush deepened on the old man's cheek, and his watery blue eyes shifted uneasily under the steady gaze of the judge. He longed to refuse, but he dare not. He knew that his life lay at the mercy of this man, and smooth though the outside was, he knew something of the foul rottenness that lay beneath.

"What can I say?" he uttered, slowly. "It is not for me to decide. It is the child you seek for a wife—let her decide."

"I have already asked her, and she refuses my suit," coldly responded Judge Bruno.

"Then that surely settles the question—"

"Not at all," coolly interposed the suitor. "As you say, May is but a child as yet, in worldly wisdom, if not in years. She does not know what is for her own good. You are older and wiser. You know me better than she does. You know that I am rich—growing more wealthy every day—and that I can load her down with all the luxuries of life."

"That all may be true enough, but my telling her so, will not change her heart—will not cause love to spring up in the place of dislike, or even indifference. But if you insist, I will tell her all this."

"You will do more than merely echo my words," and the voice of the judge assumed a cold, metallic ring. "You will point out the wisest course for her to pursue, and see that she does not stray aside from it."

"I'm not sure that I quite understand you, sir," and there was a clearer sound to the old man's tones, but Judge Bruno paid no attention to the warning.

"Listen, then. I am not used to repeat my words. I love May Dunwood, and have sworn that she shall become my wife, by fair means if possible, by foul if all others fail. You are the only person who has any influence over her, and I call on you to use that power in my behalf. Work how you please, choose your arguments to suit yourself, but be sure that you bring her consent to marry me—"

"And if I refuse?" interposed Old Neb.

"You will not refuse because you know that I hold your life at my disposal. One word from my lips, and you are a dead man. Then who will protect your dainty daughter?"

Was Judge Bruno blind? Could he not see that he was pushing to the wall one who might prove dangerous as a wild beast brought to bay? Or was he purposely goading the old man to desperation? If so, he could not have hit upon a surer method than that last sneering taunt.

There was one redeeming trait in the character of this old man; his passionate love for the child whom he had stolen long years ago from the arms of her father. At that time rendered a veritable fiend by rum and the disgrace which he had brought upon a hitherto honorable name, he stole the child, vowing to rear and train her in every vice and evil that renders woman hideous and loathly. When this education was complete, he intended to restore her to her parent, his enemy, and thus complete his diabolical revenge. But as time passed on, he learned to love the little girl, and ended by forgetting his evil schemes. Day by day that love grew more powerful, until now it had conquered all else. During the wild life he had led, his one solace, save May, had been liquor. He knew that it was killing him, but he could not leave it alone. At nearly regular intervals he would go mad with drink, as has been shadowed forth in these pages, but as May grew older she argued with him, then begged on her knees, tears in her eyes, that he would forswear the strong drink that made him a devil while its influence lasted. Time and again he took the oath, but as often broke it under strong temptation. But now it had been nearly a year since a drop of any liquid stronger than water had passed his lips, thanks to the tearful pleadings and watchful care of the maiden. Yet the old fire was in his system. At times he suffered the tortures of the damned, and felt that he must have whisky or die; but each time the tearful face of the pleading girl rose before him, and he fought against the temptation and conquered it.

From this his love for May may be imagined. It was stronger far than life. No wonder, then, that the ill-concealed threat of the judge set his brain on fire.

"Your death, devil of hell!" he screamed, flashing forth his knife and leaping upon the judge with indescribable fury.

Swiftly the weapon fell, and Judge Bruno felt a burning pain in his breast, while the claw-like fingers of the old man tore furiously at his throat.

With a fierce curse he kicked back his chair and grappled with the madman, striving to keep the blood-stained blade away from his person. But the old man seemed to have recovered all the power and activity of his youth, and Judge Bruno, amazed at such an exhibition of strength in one so old and apparently shattered, felt himself reeling, felt those bony legs winding around his own and rendering his footing unsteady—then give way, both falling heavily, the madman on top!

With a mighty effort Judge Bruno succeeded in turning his snarling adversary, and crushing him back to the floor, he wrested the knife from his hand. His own face that of a demon, he raised the blood-stained weapon and grated venomously:

"Die, then, you obstinate devil!"

CHAPTER XII.

A ROPE FOR A BULLET.

JUDGE BRUNO'S suspicions were quite correct. It was because May Dunwood recognized him that she beat such a hasty retreat, though ignorant of the fact that he had seen her. Not that her course of action would have been altered by this.

From the very first she had disliked the judge. Whenever those brilliant black eyes rested upon her form or face, a cold chill crept over her, and she felt that peculiar, incomprehensible feeling of mingled attraction and aversion that one feels when one's gaze encounters that of a venomous serpent. Several times he had attempted approaches, in a dignified, fatherly sort of manner, but these opportunities were rare, for May's eyes grew keen as those of a motherless chicken whose relatives the hungry hawk has feasted upon one after another, and it was rare that Judge Bruno won within speaking distance. Even his matchless impudence had never dared to insult her openly, though a more sophisticated ear might have known that the judge was cunningly seeking to corrupt her mind. But then there came an entire change

in his tone and manner. He became an humble, respectful adorer, and for the first time entered into the pursuit with all his powers enlisted, for he knew now what a golden prize the little mountain girl had become in the matrimonial market. He played his cards as skillfully as possible, but it was labor lost. He—Judge Bruno, the King of Red Rock—was scornfully refused by the maiden before whom he humbled himself. In the surprise and chagrin of the moment, Judge Bruno forgot his conventional mask, and the little mountain girl fled in haste as she, for the first time, read his devilish, unforgiving nature in his blazing eyes. From that moment there was not the faintest chance for Judge Bruno to gain his desired ends by fair means, and the result of a second attempt convinced him of this fact.

May Dunwood could not even suspect his reasons for persisting in an unwelcome suit, and it was more instinct than aught else that led her to steal away now.

The morning was charming, just warm enough to make the shadows cast by the mountain trees very grateful, and the maiden, once beyond sight of the lone cabin, wandered dreamily along, unheeding whither her foot-steps trended. But her reverie was suddenly broken by a human form stepping out from behind a dense bush just before her, and May Dunwood started back with an involuntary exclamation, one hand instinctively seeking the revolver that hung by her side.

"There is no cause for fear, lady," uttered a deep, mellow voice which, though heard only once before, was instantly recognized by the maiden, and as the momentary dizziness fled, she saw that the Cherokee, Kostoyeak, stood before her.

"I was very silly to be so frightened," she said, frankly extending her hand, which was instantly swallowed up by the dusky palm in a warm, earnest pressure. "But you appeared so suddenly, like a ghost—"

"I feared to show myself before, lest you avoid me, and there is much that I must say to you, lady," earnestly uttered the Cherokee, casting a keen, swift glance around them. "I would have sought you at your home, but there are evil eyes on the alert, and I feared to bring fresh trouble upon you."

"Not that bad man—the one who calls himself Equinox Tom? In defending me, you have brought danger on yourself," said May, impetuously.

A bright glow came into the eyes of the Cherokee, and his lips parted to utter words for which he might have been sorry. Fortunately he regained his self-control.

"He is only a coyote that hunts as the panther bids. His master is the one from whom real danger is to be expected; in assaulting you yesterday, he only obeyed orders."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the maiden, wonderingly.

"That your real enemy—the only one to be feared in your case—is the man who calls himself Judge Bruno," earnestly replied Kostoyeak. "It is to put you on your guard against him that I am here; to tell you of his devilish schemes that you may be ready to thwart them."

May Dunwood shrunk involuntarily from the speaker. His tones were so ardent—there was such a glowing light in his big blue eyes, that she felt alarmed and confused, she scarce knew why.

The Cherokee smiled faintly as he noticed this.

"You wonder who and what I am, that betray such interest in your behalf—why a poor Indian dares to obtrude himself and his advice—"

"Stop! you wrong us both," cried the maiden, her cheeks flushed. "You have proven your good will by risking your life for me, a stranger—"

"One would hardly travel all the way from the city of New York for the sake of meeting an entire stranger," laughed the other, softly. "Nay, lady; I am in sober earnest, and there are still more incredible facts for you to learn. For instance: you believe your name is May Dunwood, and that Elisha Dunwood is your father?"

The maiden gazed at him in bewilderment. Surely he was sane, and yet—what could be his meaning?

"It may be an unwelcome revelation, and you may hate me for what I say, but I have no choice. Your rightful name is Maud Beverley, that of your father, Judge Everett Beverley. When an infant, you were stolen away from him by an inveterate enemy, whose rightful name is Eleazer Trimble. What he now calls himself, you can guess," slowly added the Cherokee, as the maiden turned pale and began to tremble.

In silence he handed her a small package of papers. Supporting herself against a tree-trunk, the bewildered girl opened and read them. Dazed though her brain was, she was able to understand sufficient to show that the Cherokee had not spoken without good warrant for his words. Yet even then she felt a bitter pang as she thought of the old man whom, un-

til now, she had believed her father. Disreputable, graceless old scamp though he was, her young life had known nothing else to love, and she could think of nothing else just now. The announcement of the immense fortune that only awaited her claiming, was hardly understood.

The Cherokee watched her in silence, a sad, half-yearning, half-regretful light in his eyes. Was it because he realized what an immense distance there must be between the great heiress and the humble Indian, chief though he was? Had he dared to fall in love with her, knowing what he did?

"Pardon me, lady," he said, softly, as the tears began to roll down the maiden's cheeks. "There is one word of warning I must speak before I go. Put up those papers now. You can read and consider them thoroughly when you have recovered from the shock this disclosure has given you. Just now I must request your closest attention."

"Through no fault of mine, an evil and dangerous man has learned all that those documents can tell him. He has resolved to profit by this knowledge, through you; in plain words, he has sworn to marry you, that he may gain possession of the great fortune rightfully yours, and he is a man who will hesitate at no outrage, no crime, in attaining his ends. I mean the man who calls himself Judge Bruno, but who is an escaped convict."

A sharp report echoed through the hills, and without a cry or groan, the Cherokee fell heavily forward upon his face.

A hoarse yell of Satanic exultation followed the dastardly shot, and a man leaped out from his ambush, rushing toward his fallen foe, his revolver still smoking.

It was Equinox Tom, whose bruised and battered face now looked like that of a veritable fiend as he halted a few steps away and raised his weapon to make all sure by a second shot, though the fallen Indian gave no signs of life.

May had turned to flee as she recognized the ruffian, but her fear was swallowed up by deadly anger as she noted this cowardly purpose, and quick as thought her revolver was out and leveled.

It was a snap-shot and fired without any attempt at taking aim, but a snarling curse broke from the lips of the bully, the pistol dropped from his benumbed fingers and his dingy shirt was stained a brighter red by the blood that gushed from his forearm.

"Back! cowardly assassin!" she cried, swiftly raising the hammer and covering his broad breast.

But Equinox Tom was no coward when only confronted by a woman, and with a snarling imprecation, he leaped forward, ducking low to avoid the expected shot.

Swift as were his motions, he would have fallen a dead man, had not the cartridge on which the hammer fell, failed to explode. And then, before the maiden could do aught more, she was nearly crushed in his foul embrace.

"You infarnal little spitfire! Boss or no boss, I'll hev sweet pay fer that shot!" he cried, wrestling the pistol from her grasp and throwing it away.

An unholy light was in his blood-shot eyes, and Satanic passions glowed in his brutal face. A soul-sickening horror came over the poor girl as she realized the horrible peril that threatened her now, and she fought him with all her strength, augmented by despair. But he only laughed as he held her fast—a leering, devilish laugh that told how little mercy she need expect at his hands.

The bully of Red Rock laughed too soon.

Even as he felt the despairing struggles of his intended victim grow fainter—just as he lowered his foul lips to pollute hers—a powerful hand grasped his throat and drew his head backward with resistless might, and a heavy blow on the crown knocked him senseless. The same strong arms clasped May Dunwood in time to keep her from falling, and with her close clasped to his breast, leaped behind a vine-topped boulder hard by.

A faint cry broke from her lips as she saw, as through a mist, the face of Kostoyeak close to hers, and with a swift flush that showed through his dusky skin the Cherokee drew back, believing she had read the mad impulse that urged him to kiss back the color into her pallid lips.

"You are safe now—fear nothing," he muttered, rising until he could view the ground beyond through the vines.

Equinox Tom lay there, bleeding and senseless, but no other enemy was visible, and the hard set lines that marked the Indian's face began to relax.

"I thought—I saw you fall—I believed you were dead!"

Kostoyeak turned to May, his face as tender now as it had been hard, a rare smile lighting up his countenance. Any one at all versed in the tender passion could not have mistaken that smile, or the light in his eloquent eyes. But the maiden had never known love other than that she felt for poor Old Neb, and the innocence that shone in her eyes abashed the Cherokee.

He laughed hardly as he pushed aside his

turban and showed where the bullet had cut through his scalp, just above his left ear.

"The coward wanted to make too sure. Had he chosen my body, he could hardly have missed his aim."

"And all this for me!"

"Not so," was the quick reply. "That rascal has good cause for hating and wishing me forever out of the way. But he has run the length of his rope at last—"

"You mean to kill him—oh, do not—don't stain your hands with his blood, justly as he deserves death!" earnestly exclaimed the maiden, her hands clasping his.

"He is your bitter enemy and persecutor. Yet you can plead thus for his life? You know not what you ask, lady. While he lives, neither of us are safe—"

"Deliver him over to justice, but do not you kill him. I ask it for my sake!"

The pronouns were emphasized, though perhaps unconsciously, but Kostoyeak felt a glad thrill of almost intoxicating joy. Frail foundation for such wild hopes, but even an Indian cannot always control his wits, when he finds himself over head and ears in love!

"For your sake, I promise. He shall live until he kills himself, for all of me. But do not ask any more for him. He deserves punishment, and he shall receive it."

Once more Kostoyeak took a careful survey of the ground and satisfied himself that there were no other enemies in view. Then he turned again to May.

"Now I ask a promise in return. Will you grant it?"

She looked up into his eyes, and then gave a mute assent.

"You must go straight home now. Study those papers carefully, but keep their contents and what has passed here to-day a secret from everybody. And more: promise me that you will not again wander alone from home, until I come and assure you that all danger is at an end. Will you pledge me this?"

"You have earned the right to ask even more, and I willingly give you my promise," was the prompt reply.

Kostoyeak clasped her hand warmly, then picked up her pistol and the scattered papers. As he pressed them into her hands, he looked down into her fair face with an intentness that almost awed her. Then, in a strained voice, as he turned away like one afraid to trust himself:

"Go now—and remember your pledge."

The maiden hastened away, her cheeks flushed, her heart beating curiously fast and unsteadily, hardly knowing whether she was most glad or sorry. At what? It was the question she asked herself, but could not answer.

Kostoyeak stood beside the fallen bully of Red Rock until May Dunwood disappeared along the winding trail, then, as Equinox Tom gave signs of recovery, he removed the bully's belt, cutting it into slits with which he firmly bound him hand and foot, tossing the pistols into the brush. Then, with an ease that evidenced his wonderful strength, he picked up the huge carcass and bore it with seeming ease to the edge of a small precipice, dropping it unceremoniously to the ground.

The shock of falling hastened the return of the bully's consciousness, and a howl of mingled fear and rage broke from him as he recognized the Cherokee, who was then bending over the precipice, scanning its face.

"You see—Injun not so easy kill," he laughed, turning to Equinox Tom, and quietly drawing a coil of slender but strong rope from around his waist. "He got more lives dan tom-cat, but he don't like to fool all time. One, two time he git your life—tree time—now he take it 'way, sure."

"You devil!" gasped the bully, turning livid with terror as he saw the Cherokee dexterously forming a running noose. "You don't mean to hang me?"

"No—Blow-hard hang own self," and Kostoyeak laughed pleasantly. "White Lily beg not kill—me say 'he live till he kill own self.' Kostoyeak never lie, but Blow-hard too big fool to live longer time. Must hang his own self."

The Cherokee slipped the noose over the bully's head, drawing it snug around his throat despite the struggles of the now thoroughly craven wretch. Then he rolled him over until his lower limbs overhung the escarpment.

"Bes' lay still," he added warningly. "Fall over and break neck, sure. See! rope tie fast to tree now."

Equinox Tom did see, and lay still save for trembling like a leaf, nor did he dare struggle when Kostoyeak slowly pushed him over the edge, holding him fast by the shoulders, until his feet rested upon a narrow projection of rock, bringing his head a trifle below the escarpment.

"Steady! Fall now, you choke mighty hard," laughed the Cherokee as he relaxed his grasp. "Long time you stan' still, you all right. You' foot slip—good-by John!"

The miniature precipice was not more than twenty feet high, bushes and brambles growing densely at its base, so that a fall from where Equinox Tom stood, would be no serious matter. But fall he could not while the rope held.

Thoroughly cowed, he begged for mercy, making the most extravagant offers for life, but he might as well have spared his breath for all the impression he made on the Cherokee.

"Me say me won't kill—dat's enough. You git tired standin', let go toe-nails, an' hang own self. Dat bes' ting you kin do. You sarve debble top ground long 'nough. Time you go home. Good-by, John!" and with a mocking laugh the gaudy turban drew back out of the wretched man's sight.

CHAPTER XIII.

NOT ALTOGETHER A FAILURE.

WHEN a man like Judge Bruno casts off all restraint and gives free rein to his rage, it is a terrible sight, and woe unto those who lie helpless at his mercy!

Old Neb felt that choking gripe tighten upon his throat, heard that horrible grating, gnashing of teeth, and saw that blood stained weapon quivering in the air above his heart. He struggled desperately for life, but he knew that it was useless. Not a gleam of mercy in those blazing orbs, in that fiendish face so terribly distorted by mad rage and hatred.

An instant more and the old man would have died—but in that instant aid came. A pistol exploded, and Judge Bruno felt the knife torn from his grasp, hurled across the room to fall clinking upon the stone hearth.

Like a flash came back the story told by Equinox Tom of the manner in which he had been disarmed, and Judge Bruno expected to behold the lithe form of the Cherokee chief leap into the room upon him. There was an ugly, wolfish look on his face as he glared toward the door, partially rising and thrusting one hand into his bosom after another weapon, but the vision which greeted his eyes was so different from what he had expected, that he seemed petrified.

May Dunwood had hastened home in accordance with her promise to Kostoyeak, reaching the door just as Judge Bruno was about to deal the fatal blow, and almost unconsciously she drew her pistol and fired. The bullet that should have pierced the brain of the scoundrel, ranged high and struck the weapon from his grasp, lacerating two of his fingers in doing so.

The maiden, lent strength and courage by the emergency, rushed into the room and flung her weight against the judge, fairly pushing him off the old man.

"Touch him again, and you die!" she cried, her eyes flashing, her pistol covering him as he half lay upon the cabin floor. "Coward! an old and feeble man—"

A hollow groan broke from the lips of Old Neb, and forgetting all else, May dropped her revolver and knelt down beside the only father she had ever known, raising his gray head into her lap, kissing his discolored face and lips, while choking sobs of mingled indignation and pity shook her frame.

No man knew better how to make the best of a bad situation, and by a strong exertion of will, Judge Bruno got the better of his insane temper. Shaking the blood from his fingers, he secured possession of the pistol dropped by May Dunwood, then arose and stepping to the door, cast a swift glance over the surroundings. He could see no one near, and satisfied on this point, he turned toward May, whose flashing eyes met his undauntedly.

"Would you murder him now that he is helpless?"

The taunt was imbibed by the utter scorn that filled her voice, and Judge Bruno turned greenish yellow. But he managed to control both his voice and words.

"You would not speak thus if you knew all, Miss Dunwood," he said, speaking slowly and with difficulty. "I came here to-day as a friend, and without the least provocation on my part, your father drew his knife and leaped upon me. You can see where he struck," touching his left breast where his linen was cut and where the crimson stain was slowly widening. "Straight over the heart, and had his strength equaled his rancor, he would have driven his knife home, and this without any warning, any notice on his part that I had roused his anger. I did not know but what the wound was mortal—I do not yet know its extent. Was it to be wondered at that I defended myself when he attempted to repeat the blow? I only acted as any man with blood in his veins would have acted when so fiercely assaulted. Yet I am glad that you came in just as you did, else I would now be regretting the death of a man whom I have been proud to call my friend."

It was an adroit speech, and only for the earnest warning given her by Kostoyeak, May might well have been deceived. As it was, only with difficulty could she keep back the retort that sprung to her lips.

Judge Bruno saw this, and knew that he was not believed. Outwardly he gave no sign, but deep down in his heart he recorded an oath of bitter revenge that included both the old man and the young girl.

"You are angry at me now, and I cannot find it in my heart to blame you," he said, instead of the hot curses which he longed to pour

forth. "I will intrude no longer. When you have time to think it all over, you may be able to do me justice in this. Suffer me—he will recover sooner lying upon the bed."

As he spoke, Judge Bruno stooped and raised the emaciated form in his arms despite the slight resistance of the maiden. As he deposited the body upon the bed, he slipped the silver flask from his pocket, unscrewed the top and poured a portion of its contents into the open mouth of Old Neb, before May could interfere or even divine his intention. But as the pungent smell of the strong liquor was wafted through the room, a cry of horror and indignation burst from her lips, and she endeavored to strike the fatal flask from his hands.

"There is no cause for alarm, Miss May," he said, avoiding her hand and replacing the top. "The liquor is pure, and I did not give him enough to hurt a child—"

"Go, traitor, villain—leave the house!" panted the maiden, leaning over the bed, her arms around the body of Old Neb, whose mouth was now tightly closed, her eyes flashing through the tears that obscured her sight. "God forgive me if I misjudge you, but I fear you have willfully murdered him—"

"Are you mad?" gasped Judge Bruno, in seeming amazement. "I—murder him?"

"Yes—you know what a slave he has been to strong drink—you know how I have fought for his good and won his promise never to touch the vile stuff, that steals away his brain and leaves him a madman—yet you have dared to give him that devilish essence—"

She could say no more. Overtaken, her senses reeled, then gave way, and she sunk in a swoon across the bosom of the old man.

Assured that she could not read the truth, the villain suffered his mask to lift, and his face assumed the expression of a very fiend of evil. For a moment he stood gloating over his victims, but then, keeping his foul ends in view through all, he slipped the flask into Old Neb's pocket.

It was well for his diabolical schemes that he acted so promptly, not yielding to the brutal impulse that urged him to pollute the lips of the fair girl whom he was fast learning to love—as far as he could love—for herself alone, for scarcely was the flask hidden than May, with a shuddering sigh, recovered her senses.

"You here yet?" and the girl's native spirit flashed up, restoring her strength as though by magic.

"Do you think me a block, or stone?" impetuously cried Black Bruno, now more than ever deserving the *sobriquet* sometimes bestowed upon him by the irreverent. "You order me away as though I were an egg-stealing cur! What have I done to deserve this? Is it because I dared to defend my life when it was sought by a madman, who had not the slightest provocation—or is it because I have been bold enough to fall in love with you?"

A cold, cutting laugh parted the lips of the maiden.

"Is it as the daughter of Old Neb that you love me, or—"

The memory of the pledge exacted by Kostoyeak checked her reckless speech, but the harm was already done. Despite his self-control, Judge Bruno changed countenance, and May knew that he mentally finished her sentence. But he quickly rallied, and with an ardor that was not wholly feigned, he made reply:

"I love you for yourself alone, despite your scorn. I know that your father has done neither of you much credit, but I am ready to overlook that. If you smile upon my suit, it is you I marry, not him—"

"Stop!" and May Dunwood flung back her head proudly, her eyes drying themselves with this heat of anger. "You have said too much. I repeat what I said when you first broached the subject, with the addition that I now loathe and despise you a thousand times more than I disliked you then. Go—and never dare come here again. If I am unable to defend myself from your odious advances, I will appeal to those whose manhood has not been wholly crushed by your ill-won influence. Go—or I may fire again, and with a surer hand than before!"

Judge Bruno laughed shortly as he tossed her pistol on the bed, then shook a few drops of blood from his injured hand.

"Do you think I would flinch from a pistol in your hands? Your words cut deeper and give me more pain than lies in the power of powder and lead to inflict. There lies your weapon. Make good your threat. See! the blood drawn by the hand of your father makes a good target. Beneath it lies my heart. Send a bullet home, and end all, forever! But until that heart ceases to beat, you cannot crush out my love for you, nor check my lips from saying as much at every opportunity. It is my life—my only hope of salvation. Deny me that love, and life is not worth living. Yield to it—grant me your love in return, or if that is impossible, suffer me to love on without rebuke—and I will make this life a heaven upon earth for you. I will be your slave—your dog—"

Thus far Judge Bruno had spoken with a rush

and power of words that surprised even himself, and almost stunned the maiden who shrunk away from his passion-glowing eyes—but now she rallied, and scornfully cried:

"A slave, a dog you may be, but never mine! Once more I bid you begone! If there is a spark of manhood left in your nature, you will not force me to say more."

"I will go," and the judge even smiled sadly as he spoke. "But the day will come when you will be sorry for this—when you will learn to value the love you now so scornfully reject. I do not say this as a threat. Naught that you can say or do has the power to raise my anger against you. But I know that ardent, soulful love and adoration, like mine, must some day win the reward it deserves. Until then, I am content to bide my time."

He picked up his hat, and bowing low to the scornful, indignant maiden, left the house, not pausing until the little cabin was hidden from view, but then!

The rage that had almost suffocated him, burst forth in a torrent of curses and imprecations. It was a fearful, disgusting exhibition of man's weakness and depravity. He raved until he frothed at the mouth, gnashing his powerful teeth like a maddened wild boar, tearing up the turf and stones, crashing down the frail bushes and acting like a madman. And a madman he was, for the time being. Woe to the man, friend or foe, who should venture across his path while that paroxysm lasted!

This spell was short-lived. It was too furious to last long, for no brain could have stood it for many minutes. And then, completely exhausted, Judge Bruno lay upon the torn ground, panting heavily, his face pale and ghostly, his bloodshot eyes closed.

How long he lay thus, he could not himself have told, but it was until a strange, thrilling sound floated to his ears from a distance—the sound of a human voice, either in great agony or boundless fear.

Judge Bruno started up on one elbow, and listened intently. He was not kept long in suspense, for again that horrible cry came to his ears, this time unmistakable.

"Some unlucky devil in a box—ah!" and his eyes began to glow afresh, as a sudden thought flashed across his mind. "It may be—the boys may have caught one of them—Satan grant that it may be that infernal Dan Brown!"

He leaped to his feet, all traces of exhaustion gone, and looked to the cartridges in his revolver, then strode rapidly in the direction from whence those sounds floated.

In leaving the cabin, Judge Bruno, in his haste to reach a point where he might give vent to the rage that was burning up his heart and brain, had deviated from the main trail, and chance or fate had taken him to where those horrible cries could reach his ears, when he paused; whether this was fortunate or otherwise, the sequel will show.

At almost regular intervals those screams were uttered, and Judge Bruno could ere long distinguish the tones of a man. He hoped that at least one of his deadly enemies had fallen into the power of his merciless tools, but despite this, his caution increased as he drew nearer the scene of torture.

Creeping, crawling, he stole along, revolver cocked and ready for instant use, should these yells prove to be only a decoy, taking advantage of every bit of available cover, and displaying no mean skill as a scout, soon gaining a point of rocks from whence he could see that, so far, at least, as the author of those horrible cries was concerned, it was no farce, but a stern tragedy.

To all appearance a man was pinned against the face of a perpendicular rock, in an upright position, for the judge could distinguish no foothold to support him. But then, so he looked closer, he detected a slender, dark line leading over the escarpment, and knew that it must be a rope.

His keenest gaze could detect no one else in the vicinity, and with his curiosity fully aroused, he moved cautiously around until he could see the face of the helpless wretch.

An oath burst from his lips, as he peered forth from his new cover. In the tortured wretch, he recognized his henchman, Equinox Tom. The oath was not called forth by sympathy for the rascal who served him so well as his sodden wits would permit, for gratitude was not one of Judge Bruno's virtues. But he knew that once more his inveterate enemies must have won a victory. No other would dare thus treat the Bully of Red Rock, since all knew that striking him was dealing a blow at the two kings of the town, his backers.

In his anger, Judge Bruno arose from cover, and was instantly recognized by the fear-sharpened eyes of Equinox Tom.

"Help—save me, boss, fer the love o' heaven!" he screamed, the horrible torture he had mentally endured, almost crazing him. "Quick! my feet is a-slippin'! They're goin' to sleep! Help me—cuss ye! why don't ye help me?"

A howl of fury and agony choked off his speech as the judge dropped down behind his cover again, and the unfortunate wretch be-

lieved he was about to be abandoned to his fate by the only man who could aid him.

The curses and imprecations that flowed from his blood-and-froth-stained lips, were even more horrible than the flood to which Judge Bruno had given vent a few minutes before, for they came from one who believed he was standing on the brink of eternity. But the blasphemy brought with it its own punishment, for his benumbed feet lost their hold upon the narrow projection of rock, and a frightful screech burst from the bully's lips as he felt himself falling!

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRAP, AND WHAT IT CAUGHT.

THE rope tightened around Equinox Tom's throat as his feet slipped from the ledge, but that was as far as his horrible anticipations were realized. Instead of being checked by the rope with a force that would either break his neck or forever shut off his breath, he crashed down into the briars and brambles, the pliant cord falling on and coiling around his head like a snake. But the chief of Red Rock was not aware of this at the moment. For what had seemed ages, he had stood there, believing himself doomed, suffering the tortures of a thousand deaths by anticipation, and now, when he saw aid just beyond reach of his hand, when he felt himself falling, his overtaken senses gave way, and he lay as he fell, doubled up and motionless as a corpse.

Judge Bruno was none the less puzzled, and crouched lower in his ambush, his black eyes roving swiftly around, feeling sure that the authors of this farce—for farce it must be, since there had not been even a momentary check to Equinox Tom's fall when the rope yielded—must be hidden somewhere near to enjoy the *denouement*. But he looked in vain. Bit by bit he searched each cover where a human being could lie hidden, then concluded that the enemy had gone.

It was with a feeling of angry contempt that Judge Bruno stood over the Bully of Red Rock, kicking him back to consciousness. He had no sympathy for a man who failed in his undertakings, and he knew without asking, that Equinox Tom had made an even worse blunder than common.

"I could almost wish the rope had done its work better!" he muttered, again digging his toe into the fallen man's ribs.

This application was successful in arousing Equinox Tom, and as his blood-shot eyes opened, they gradually filled with stupid amazement, at finding himself still in such a temperate climate, perhaps.

"Get up you clumsy fool!" growled Judge Bruno, contemptuously thrusting the bully with his foot. "Get up and tell me who it was that played such a trick on you?"

Equinox Tom raised one hand to his throat, and as his fingers touched the noose that still encircled his neck, a convulsive shudder shook his frame.

"It was horrible!" he gasped, the words issuing hoarsely and with difficulty. "The tortur's o' hell kain't be no wuss then what I endured stan'in' up thar, knowin' that only a teenty heel-hold kept me from hangin'—"

Judge Bruno interrupted him with a short, hard laugh, picking up the other end of the rope which was still looped about a small decayed stick. And fastened to this stick, by means of a stout thorn, was a small scrap of paper.

"Let this be a lesson; beware of the next time, for then both ends of the rope will be fastened," read the judge, while Equinox Tom listened with gaping mouth.

"You don't mean—" he gasped, unable to complete the sentence.

"That you have made an infernal ass of yourself—yes!" growled the judge. "It is written here—and see!" as he held up the bit of stick and showed where it bore traces of having been thrust into the earth. "That is all that kept the rope from falling down upon your stupid head. And all the while you stood there, bellowing like a bull calf—"

But his reproaches fell on unhearing ears. Mechanically Equinox Tom took the telltale stick and paper in his hands, staring at them stupidly. Gradually the humiliating truth was working its way through his thick skull, and the judge's anger was appeased as he noted the venomous, vengeful fire that grew deeper in the eyes of the Red Rock chief.

The tortures had been none the less poignant—Tom could not have suffered more had it all ended as he believed it must, in hanging until he was dead—but this discovery was even more bitter. The fiercest fires of hell flamed up in his heart and shone through his blood-shot eyes.

A low, strained laugh, far more impressive than the bitterest oaths, gurgled up in his throat as he removed the noose from around his neck and carefully coiled the rope around his middle.

"Who was it that played such a scurvy trick, Tom?" asked the judge, curiously.

"A good fri'nd o' mine an' yourn," he replied, with a ghastly smile. "That Injun feller—Kostoyeak."

"Not alone—he must have had help, surely?"

"The devil mought 'a' stood at his elbow, but I didn't see him," then with an outburst of fury in strong contrast to the forced calmness he had displayed, Equinox Tom hissed: "But I'll be up-sides with him yit! I sw'ar by heaven an' hell an' all that lays atween, to never know rest ontel I've paid him back in his own coin! I'll kerry this rope ontel I kin sarve him as he sarved me—only wuss! I'll hang him with it, head down, over a slow fire, and strip off his copper-colored hide inch by inch to gag him with whenever he screeches out fer marcy!"

Even Judge Bruno was astonished by the outburst, for he never suspected the stupid brute of being capable of such acute feeling, but the fury pleased him mightily.

"Keep your oath, and besides the sweet revenge, it will put a cool thousand dollars in your pocket, Tom. But come—let's get out of this. The cunning rascal may even now be watching us from some hiding-place among these rocks. Stop!" and his strong hand closed upon the other's arm, "don't be a fool. If he be hidden near, he holds both our lives at his mercy, and could knock us over, one after the other, without exposing himself. Follow me, and I believe you can taste your revenge this very day!"

The weaker will yielded to the stronger, and with a sullen glare around him, Equinox Tom followed his master's lead.

Not until they regained the trail did Judge Bruno speak.

"I believe I have found out who and what this cunning red rascal is, and if I am right, I and Kimball are his game, rather than you. I believe he knew that I was no great distance away, and that he left your jaws free to yell out and draw me on to investigate. If so, he was most likely on the look-out, and probably following us now. Fool!" he grated, angrily, as Equinox stared behind them. "Keep your face and eyes under control, unless you would ruin my plans and cheat yourself of the revenge I am offering."

"Jest show me a way to git even, an' you kin say or do with me what you please," muttered Equinox hoarsely.

"Keep a guard over yourself, then. I believe that the Cherokee is a detective, sent here on scent of our night-work. If so, he will bite at any bait that looks like the genuine, and if you play your part well, we may catch the rascal in a trap."

"When we get to the divide, you will take the trail leading to town, while I strike over to visit the boys. Take cover and see if anybody is dogging me; no one can pass the divide without your seeing them, if you use your eyes well. If I am followed, let him or them get out of sight, then take the short cut and get ahead of us. You will have time enough, and I will not hurry myself. Lay in ambush by the split pine; the cover is good there, and no one can come within pistol range from this side without your seeing them. Give me a sign as I go by—the barking of a pine squirrel will do—if the game is afoot. Then lay low, and this time *shoot to kill!*"

"But I ain't heeled—that devil stole my barkers—"

"Careful—sidle up close, and don't let even the sunlight see you take it," muttered Judge Bruno, passing a revolver into the bully's hand. "Cover your man with that, and if your hand is steady, he is your meat."

Equinox Tom grinned. He knew the reputation won by the magnificent weapon he was hiding away—the finest and truest that money could buy.

"Mind, now—play your part well. Revenge and a thousand dollars at one stroke," muttered the judge as they reached the divide.

The Chief of Red Rock nodded, a vicious light in his blood-streaked eyes, then they separated, the bully proceeding toward town, while Judge Bruno walked leisurely along the ridge at right angles.

He was playing a hazardous game as he well knew. Instinct told him that an inveterate foe was dogging him, seeking to learn his secret of secrets before dealing the final blow. Only for this belief, bold as he was, Judge Bruno would not have dared act thus after the warning he had received. None knew better than he how easy it would be for a man, gifted as the Cherokee had proved himself, to steal near enough to send a bit of lead through his brain or heart.

"It's a risk I must run," he muttered, his teeth grating together as he conquered the strong temptation to cast a glance backward. "If that devil, as I believe, is either Dan Brown or Sol Scott, my life is safe enough until he learns all about our mint. Neither of them would be content with a partial victory. I hope the fiend is dogging me! If Tom only does his work well!"

That was probably the hardest hour's work Judge Bruno ever did in his life, but he managed to accomplish it, and never once cast a backward glance over the faint trail he was following. It did not strike him then that there was such a thing as showing *too much* caution. The exciting events which had crowded upon him so thickly since he dealt that treacherous

blow while riding in the stage, less than twenty hours ago, were enough to confuse even his brain, and he gave his supposed pursuer credit for less cunning than he himself would have exhibited under the same circumstances.

Resolved to make all sure this time, Judge Bruno measured his pace so as to give Equinox Tom ample time to reach his place of ambush ahead of him, and his heart throbbed fast and heavily as he neared the selected spot. Should the "chief" be there, then the cunning trap must succeed—he was followed, and his enemy was surely coming on to his death!

Keenly he scrutinized the dense bushes which surrounded the pine tree whose top, though still living, had been split in halves by a lightning bolt. Not a sign of its being occupied—and his heart sunk lest his trap had been set in vain. But then, as he fairly brushed the bushes, the peculiar chitter of the pine-squirrel came softly to his ears, sending the hot blood in a dizzying flood to his brain, and making him stagger like a drunken man.

Quickly recovering, he tossed the mate to the revolver he had given Equinox Tom into the bushes, then passed on, down the gentle slope, heading for a little log cabin half-buried in the hillside a quarter of a mile beyond.

Equinox Tom gazed after him for a moment, the bushes on that side of his ambush being thin and straggling, then secured the second revolver, and with eyes that burned like blood-red coals, he settled down again, peering through an opening he had made in the foliage, watching for the Indian who had repeatedly baffled and disgraced him.

He was not kept long in suspense. The flash of a gaudy turban caught his eye, and swiftly his weapon was raised. But he did not fire. The tree from behind which the bit of bright color peeped, was a full hundred yards away, and he could not distinguish the face beneath it.

A cold chill began to play along his spinal column as he noted this caution. His intended victim clearly suspected something, and after all he might be foiled.

"Cuss the luck!" the ruffian muttered. "It's the lay o' the ground. He couldn't see the boss after he passed this kiver, an' 'spects maybe he's layin' low in here. Ef the judge hedn't bin a durned fool, he'd 'a' sheered off to one side, an' let the p'izen critter see him pass on beyond!"

It was too late to remedy this oversight now, and there was nothing to do but wait until the cautious spy should satisfy himself that the cover was empty. But then another fear struck Equinox Tom. Suppose the Cherokee should make a circuit rather than pass by this bit of suspicious-looking cover? That would be a perfectly natural course to follow—but no! Even as he thought of this, he saw the Indian creeping slowly along toward him, but keeping covered so well that it would be rank folly to attempt a shot at that distance.

The devil was in the assassin's eyes as he glared at the rock behind which his enemy had crawled, and he could distinctly feel his heart thumping violently against his ribs. So intense was his hatred that he felt he could cheerfully yield up his own life, if he might only put his foot upon the throat of his gasping, dying enemy, and crush out his last, flickering breath while taunting and reviling him in his agony.

But it was fated not to be so, just then. That was an ill-starred day for the Chief of Red Rock, for even as his fancy gloated over the picture it drew, there was a rush through the air behind him, and his face was driven violently forward into the dirt, while sinewy fingers twined themselves around his neck, effectually cutting off his breath. He sought to free himself, but in vain. As well might an infant expend its strength against that of a giant. The pistols were knocked from his hands, nor could he, blindly groping around for them, until his arms were pinioned by a pair of knees, find them again to give the alarm to Judge Bruno by firing a shot. Then came a dizzying whirl flashing over his brain, and he felt that he was being choked to death!

He was not fated to die thus nor at that moment, for when his struggles died away, his captor relaxed his grasp, and rising up, made a signal that brought the spy out from behind the rock. Had Judge Bruno or Craig Kimball been eye-witnesses, they would have recognized the two men who treated them so unceremoniously the night before—Kostoyeak the Cherokee chief and his double!

The bully's insensibility was of short duration, but when he recovered consciousness he was bound hand and foot, his jaws painfully distended by a gag, and the two Indians were dragging him by the heels away from the cover.

This painful journey was not a long one, then one of the seeming twins bent over Equinox Tom, smiling broadly.

"Blow-hard nebber git good sense; got eyes only in one side his head. Don't tink Kostoyeak kin split heself in two pieces—one foller Nigger-head, odder piece keep eye on Blow-hard."

In a spasm of fury Equinox Tom realized the fatal error he had committed, in only waiting long enough near the divide to see that Judge

Bruno was being spied upon, then rushing off blindly to secure his ambushment, never dreaming that a cunning enemy was upon his own track.

"Big fool nudder time," added the Cherokee, who seemed to take an especial delight in mocking the crestfallen bully. "Talk too loud when he swear to hang Kostoyeak, head down over fire. Dat gib Injun good idee, den he swe'r, heap still but plenty strong—swear dat Blow-hard hang an' sizzle. Dis rope do job, too!"

There was a vengeful glow in the Indian's eyes as he unwound the rope, rolling Tom over and over as he did so. And lying upon his back when the coil was free, the bully watched the movements of the Indians with fear in his heart. One of them nimbly scaled a young sapling that grew hard by, and holding on by his hands, bent the top over until his double could grasp it. The tree being held down by their united weight, one end of the rope was securely tied, and then, by its aid the tree was held bent until the noose was slipped around Tom's ankles.

With a *swish* the tree-top swung back, raising the bully clear of the ground, then his weight drew it back until his head thumped heavily on the gravel.

The Indians laughed mockingly as the human pendulum swayed up and down, the bumps gradually decreasing in force until Equinox Tom hung with his head some two feet above ground. But there was still worse to come, and a deathly sickness seized upon his heart as he saw them briskly gathering twigs and dead wood which they piled up on the spot above which he hung.

"Sizzle nice, bumby!" chuckled Kostoyeak, grinning like a veritable demon as he struck a match and held it among the dried twigs.

CHAPTER XV.

A MADMAN'S CUNNING.

THE moment Judge Bruno crossed the threshold, May Dunwood rushed to the door, closed and barred it securely. This done, she returned to the bedside, and kneeling down, hid her face, sobbing violently as her strained nerves relaxed.

She had been tried severely during the last score of hours, and stronger feelings than she could as yet find a name for had sprung into life within her bosom. These made her uneasy and restless, and now the terrible dread that assailed her on the old man's account proved more than she could bear up against.

She remembered the many long and desperate struggles which Old Neb had held with himself when the insane craving for liquor came back with redoubled force, and in which he had proved the victor only by her aid, her tears and pleading and prayers. These spells had been less frequent of late, and learning how to anticipate their coming from the signs of increasing fretfulness and restlessness, she had managed to keep the old man away from town or any dangerous company until the victory was won. But now she feared the worst. Some of the devilish essence had entered his mouth—the taste must still linger on his tongue when he should recover his consciousness. Could he escape another attack? Could he, even with her aid, conquer the longing for more? She feared not, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

A long, gasping breath from the emaciated form lying on the bed beside her was the first token May had of Old Neb's returning to consciousness, and to learn the worst at once, she arose and bent over him, her eyes looking keenly through their tears into his blood-veined orbs.

A choking sob of relief welled up in her throat, for the hungry, wolfish look she feared to see was not in Old Neb's eyes. Instead, only a vague wonder and fear.

"What are you crying for?" he muttered, huskily. "I am not sick—but what makes my throat feel so sore? Ah! I know—I remember—that cursed scoundrel!"

As though a spring had been touched, Old Neb abruptly sat up in bed, his eyes roving swiftly around the room, one hand clutching nervously at his breast, where he habitually carried his knife.

"He's gone! But there's blood on the floor—did I kill the mocking dog? Did I cut his heart out? Speak!"

"No—he is gone—he will not come back any more. We are quite safe now. Please try and forget it all."

"I'm an old and worn-out man, while he's young and strong as a grizzly bear—but he felt my knife—I felt it tear his flesh!" and there came a dancing light into Old Neb's eyes that made May shudder, for she believed her fears would soon be realized.

"No, no! do not think—forget it all!" she sobbed, trying hard to control her voice and keep her dread from showing itself too plainly. "Do you know, I had a lovely walk, and early as it is, I feel the appetite of a starving wolf! Please may we have dinner now? A cup of strong coffee would be good for you now."

The old man cast a stealthy side glance toward her, but the maiden had averted her face

before uttering the last words. She could not trust her features yet, and coffee, strong as she could make it, had ever been her best aid in fighting that deadly craving. If she could only get him to partake of it heartily now, he might never know that any of the hellish brew had passed his lips.

"Why do you ask me?" he grumbled, pettishly turning his face to the wall. "Do as you please—you always do."

With a great weight lifted from her heart, May turned away from the bed. Had she only known the truth! How much might have been spared them both!

As he rolled over in bed, Old Neb felt a hard substance beneath him, and mechanically one hand sought his pocket. A sharp cry broke from his lips as his fingers touched the metal flask—a cry that brought May back again.

"What is it, dear father?"

"Nothing—a crick in my side—don't bother; I'm all right now," sharply uttered the old man, pressing the flask close to his heart as a miser might with his loved gold.

Sadly the maiden turned away. She feared that another terrible struggle was before them both, and from past experience she dreaded the outcome.

As he eagerly listened to her retreating footsteps, Old Neb softly drew the flask from its hiding place and shook it just enough to convince himself by the soft gurgle that it was not empty, while a wild, wolfish glitter came into his bloodshot eyes.

Poor May had been hoodwinked from the first. The first contact of the strong liquor with his tongue had restored the old man's sinking senses, but he only closed his jaws and lay like one in an ecstatic trance during the rest of the scene. And it was only when he had regained complete mastery of his voice and features that Old Neb spoke.

So adroitly had it been done, that he knew not Judge Bruno placed the flask in his pocket, but the evil was already wrought. For the first time in more than a year, brandy had touched his tongue, and from that moment all Old Neb's cunning was directed to one end—how to slip away from his fair but watchful guardian angel, and fully satisfy the mad gnawing at his heart—liquor he must and would have now!

Old Neb could not have given a stronger proof of his resolution than he gave now. Resisting the longing to open the flask and drain its contents, he hid it beneath the bed-clothes, fearful lest May should scent the stuff or detect it in his breath. If he could only get rid of her—only steal away—but he had read that haunting dread in her eyes, and knew that she would not allow him to leave the cabin without her company.

"Little girl," he said abruptly, "I believe I could relish a bit of a pine squirrel if I had one nicely roasted. Guess I'll take your rifle and see if I can't knock one over."

Instantly the color died out of the girl's face, and she glided to his side, putting her hands upon his shoulders, and looking fairly into his eyes, as though to read the truth. But he did not flinch from her gaze; only wonder at her action was to be read in his eyes.

Her heart beat freer, but she resolved to make all sure.

"Father, dear, what do you remember after he—Judge Bruno—placed you on the bed?"

"I don't know—why do you ask?"

"Is there no bad taste in your mouth? Oh, father! that fiend in human shape poured some of that terrible stuff into your mouth before I could stop him—"

"What stuff? Are you going crazy?" and Old Neb seemed lost in amazement. "Now don't cry," he added pettishly as May began to sob, from joy, not pain or sorrow.

Bravely she choked down and subdued her emotions. Then, feeling that further concealment could do no good, she frankly told the cunning old rascal all that had happened while he was, as she believed, unconscious.

"I believe he meant you evil, but I trust he may be disappointed. Still, there may be danger—you nor I can ever forget the horrible past—and until we know that no harm has been done, it is only right that we should be cautious."

"That means I am to consider myself a close prisoner?"

"No, dear father," and the tears dimmed her bright eyes at his harsh tone. "Only I thought—that is—"

"You believed that I would sneak off to town like a cur? If that is all the thanks I get for weakly yielding to your foolish whims, then I'll act different in the future," and he turned sulkily away from the girl.

She felt his injustice keenly, but did not show it outwardly.

"I was only afraid you were not strong enough, father, for a walk now. If you like, I will go instead. Only—promise me that you will not leave the house while I am gone."

"If you doubt me so much, don't go—or lock the door behind you, and leave me a prisoner until you get back," he snapped.

"It is easily spoken—only a pledge not to go away before I return. That evil man may be

lurking around—he would have murdered you, only for my coming. Promise me, father—swear that you will remain here until I come, and you shall soon have your squirrel for dinner."

"You needn't go, if it's so much trouble—but I'll promise. I'll swear it on the Bible, if you can find one."

May clasped her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his, then took down the light rifle which hung on the wall. It had been given her by Old Neb, long ago, when he was flush of money, and May had become an expert in its use. Indeed there had been stern necessity for this skill in the black times gone by. More than once it had kept them from starving.

"Forgive me if I seem hard, father," she added, before departing. "Remember it is all done because I love you so dearly. If any harm should come to you, what would be my fate? Good-by—and patience. I'll not be long."

It is barely possible that Old Neb felt a little shame as he watched her out of sight, but if so, it did not last long. Closing and barring the door, he hastened to the bed, the incipient fires of madness sparkling in his eyes as his trembling hand drew forth the silver flask and unscrewed the top. His many oaths and pledges were forgotten. Judge Bruno had done his devilish work well!

He paused for a moment to sniff the aroma that rose from the flask, but he could not dally thus—the neck slipped into his mouth and clung there until the last drop of its contents ran down his parched throat.

Old Neb viewed the empty flask ruefully.

"I only meant to taste it—to draw it out as long as possible—to make believe that each drop was a gallon—and now it's all gone!" he muttered, huskily, as he moved toward the water-pail and poured some of the pure liquid into the flask.

"Bah! that tastes like medicine!" he growled in disgust, spitting out the water, and sinking into a chair. "If I hadn't been such a hog—all at one swallow—and no more nearer than town. If I hadn't promised May—"

He broke short off in his mutterings and glanced around him half-ashamed; then laughed nervously. The strong liquor, after such long abstinence, was already beginning to dance through his veins like liquid fire. A flush came into his sallow cheek, and a burning light in his eyes.

When he gave that pledge, he meant to keep it. He only thought of getting rid of the maiden long enough to enjoy the contents of the flask. He believed then, that this would satisfy the gnawing longing that almost drove him mad. But now—the flask was empty, and that hungry gnawing was doubly intensified by what he had drank. Still he remembered his pledge, and dared not break it without an excuse.

As he pondered, he thrust his hands into his pockets and toyed with the few small bits of gold and silver they contained. Only a few minutes before Judge Bruno came, he had taken them from his secret hiding-place, meaning to visit town before dinner to purchase a supply of groceries. But now he only thought of how much whisky that money would buy—and grew thirstier as he fancied himself pouring out the dearly loved liquor—then he leaped to his feet with a hard, unnatural laugh.

One who had seen Old Neb earlier in the day, would hardly have recognized him now. No longer a bowed and decrepit wreck, looking like a ghost in human garb. His face seemed fuller, his cheeks were flushed, his eyes sparkled and glowed like the orbs of ardent youth, his step was firm and his figure erect. But it was the hidden fires of insanity that made this alteration.

"That devil—black-faced dog of Satan!" he hissed, half-laughing at the cunning scheme which had flashed across his whirling, burning brain. "He is a thief for all his good looks and fine clothes. I was helpless—insensible. Who knows—he may have robbed me—robbed May—before he fled!"

Chuckling grimly, Old Neb held one hand firmly upon his pocket to keep the money from clinking as he walked, and hastened to his hiding place; lifting one of the hearth-stones, revealing a small tin box fitted in the ground. It was empty.

He let the stone fall back, and uttered a snarling cry of angry amazement that might have deceived even the closest watcher.

"Robbed—all gone! The treacherous scoundrel has robbed me!"

He said this aloud, then covered his eyes with his hand and chuckled with insane delight. Poor devil! he was trying to deceive even himself.

He arose, his face struggling between a fierce resolve and doubt.

"I promised her—I swore I'd not leave the house until she returned. I meant it, too—heaven knows I did! But she is robbed—left penniless to starve—and while I stand here, that thief may get clear off. If May was here, she would bid me follow him and recover our gold—I know that. She would not consider an oath binding, now that the circumstances are so different. She may be coming home—she may even now be in sight. I will look—I will call to her

to hasten, that she may give me back my pledge!"

Old Neb ran to the door and flung it open, but as he stepped forth, he once more covered his eyes so that not the faintest ray of light could reach them. He turned round about, as if searching the hills, then, in a voice so low that it scarcely reached his own ears, he uttered her name.

Then he changed his voice, and in a little louder tone said:

"Go, father—I give you back your pledge. Do not wait for me, but hasten to overtake the robber and wrest from him the gold he stole. Go—do not wait for me!"

He slunk back into the house and took his hat and fastened an armed belt around his waist, chuckling softly to himself.

"She took back the pledge—good girl! I knew she would when she knew all," and then he left the cabin, never once looking back or around him, but running swiftly along the trail leading down to Red Rock.

CHAPTER XVI.

FIENDISH STRATEGY.

JUDGE BRUNO reached the log cabin half-sunken in the hillside, and uttering a low whistle, the slab door was opened to him, a rough-dressed, sleepy-looking fellow standing on the threshold. A complete change came over him as soon as he recognized his visitor, and he snatched off his battered felt hat with a clumsy attempt at a bow.

"Who's inside?" sharply demanded the King of Red Rock, as he pushed past the fellow. "How many, I mean—never mind about the names."

"The reg'lar workin' shift—a dozen, all told."

"Fetch half of them out—those who can best drop their work."

The judge's authority seemed absolute here as it was elsewhere. The man made no reply, but crossing the room, he swung open a concealed door, the counterpart of the one used in the Hogan cabin, and vanished in the darkness beyond.

Judge Bruno turned and cast a glance in the direction of the ambush where he had left Equinox Tom, but it was purely mechanical, since he knew that the shoulder of the hill he had rounded concealed the split-pine thicket.

In a short time his messenger returned at the head of half a dozen men, all bearing traces of hot and hard work. Judge Bruno scowled wickedly as he saw that two of them still bore the tools they had been working with.

"You careless hounds!" he growled, "back with those tools! Would you publish our business to the whole country?"

Abashed, the delinquents hastened back. Judge Bruno stood in the door, listening intently for the sounds that should tell him the trap was being sprung.

The men returned and were bidden see that their pistols were in working condition, and to hold themselves in readiness for a dash the instant they heard a shot. But minute after minute passed by, and the expected alarm did not come. Judge Bruno grew more and more uneasy, until he could stand the suspense no longer.

"Wait here until you hear my signal. Keep a close look-out, and if you spy any stranger skulking near, kill or capture him," he hurriedly said, then stole away until he reached a spot from whence he could see the split-pine thicket.

Nothing seemed out of the way there. Not a living being was visible, and settling down under cover, Judge Bruno watched and waited until he felt sure that something was wrong—that the Cherokee either suspected the ambush, or else Equinox Tom had been wrong in thinking him followed.

In deep chagrin Judge Bruno uttered the signal that brought forward his men, borrowing a revolver from one of them, he bade them follow him.

Not until the thicket was reached did he suspect the startling truth, but then he saw where the turf was torn up and other marks of a desperate struggle. Grating his teeth savagely, he glared around him, noticing the broad trail made by the twin Indians when they dragged the bound Bully of Red Rock after them.

A fierce, bitter curse burst from his lips as he realized that once more his trusted emissary had been outwitted and defeated by his cunning adversary—perhaps worse than defeated, though he failed to see any blood stains.

"Look yonder!" suddenly cried one of the men, pointing ahead at some dimly visible object. "A man hangin', by —!"

"Steady!" cried Judge Bruno, as the fellows were about to rush forward, their curiosity aroused, and, in their ignorance of the whole facts, not realizing the danger that might attend such a rash movement. "Divide—three to the right, three to the left, and scout around that spot. Keep your eyes skinned, and make sure of any man you see not belonging to our own party."

Beginning to realize the situation, the six men stole away, and waiting until they had vanished from his view, Judge Bruno cautiously crept toward the hanging man.

As he drew nearer, he recognized Equinox Tom, strung up by the feet, though it was only by his clothes and his form that he was able to do so, for swaying and slowly turning round as the wind struck him, a blackened, hairless head and face were revealed, suspended above a few smoldering twigs.

As the judge gazed, the head of the luckless wretch swung rapidly from side to side, showing that not only did life remain, but that he had caught sight of his master.

From beyond came the signal cries of his men telling that the coast was clear, and leaping forward. Judge Bruno cut the rope and eased Equinox Tom to the ground. He saw that he was gagged, and cutting the thong, he freed his jaws, pouring eager questions upon the hapless wretch.

Equinox Tom's jaws worked, but only a husky, rattling sound came from them, and calling in his men, Judge Bruno took one of the proffered flasks and emptied its contents down the bully's throat.

The poor rascal had suffered horribly, though his mental tortures were far the worst, and it was some time before he could relate all that had befallen him.

A portion of this has already been placed before the reader. Almost immediately after the fire was kindled, Equinox Tom felt his hair ignite, and he had presence of mind enough to close his eyes firmly. In an instant his entire head and face were ablaze, and though Kostoyeak and his double smothered the flames as rapidly as possible, they did not succeed until his luxuriant hair and beard were swept away.

"'Twasn't from marcy they done it—hell's fire eternally roast 'em!" groaned Equinox Tom, sitting up and tenderly feeling of his scorched and blackened head-piece. "Fer fear I wouldn't know that, they told me as much. 'Swaller fire you kick bucket too quick!' was what he said—cuss him!"

"Which way did they go? How long since?" demanded the judge.

"I don't know. I thought my brain was bu'stin', then everythin' turned to blood around me. The next I kin remember was seein' you over yonder, an' tried to holler, but couldn't," replied Equinox Tom, but the judge did not hear him.

His keen eye caught sight of a bit of paper pinned to the trunk of the sapling to which Equinox Tom had hung, and leaping to the spot, he secured it. The paper contained a few words written in pencil, as follows:

"To Judge Bruno, alias Paul Gerue, alias Don Far-rar:

"You set a trap—we take the liberty of springing it. You make use of clumsy tools, but this one may do you better service hereafter, now that he has been thoroughly tempered. We hold no particular grudge against him, but unless he is sensible enough to desert a sinking ship, he will have to founder with you.

"You call yourself the 'King of Red Rock,' but we are your masters. You live and breathe and move in seeming freedom, but it is only by sufferance. We wish you to feel what it is to be a *haunted man*—to see each one of your cherished plans fail in turn—to live beneath the shadow of the gallows until its chill curdles your blood, and to know, through all, that naught you can do will save you from the gripe of an offended justice, represented in this case by

"DAN BROWN AND SOL SCOTT."

Judge Bruno crumpled up the paper and thrust it into his breast, forcing a laugh as he noted the curious glances of his men. He dared not tell them the truth. The names of the two detectives were known too well. Let it once get whispered about that Dan Brown of Denver and his "pard," the scarcely less celebrated Sol Scott, were in the field, and those who had cause to fear justice would lose no time in saving themselves by deserting a "sinking ship."

"It is a warning from your old friend, the Cherokee, Tom," he said, with a coyness that was really wonderful under the circumstances. "He says that the third time is the charm. And now, one and all, listen to me. This dare-devil rascal and his mate have bearded us long enough. I will give five thousand good dollars for each head, dead or alive. The offer is open to you all, and you may knock off work until the hunt is ended. Go and tell the others. Leave two of the boys, to be decided by lot, to keep guard. I will pay them extra wages. Tell them to keep all close, and suffer none to enter, save Kimball or myself. Make haste, and follow us at a distance until we reach town. The rascals may try to dog us."

The men could hardly believe their ears. For such a sum not one among them would hesitate to take a dozen lives. Then, as they began to realize it all, their lips opened for a wild cheer, only Judge Bruno cut it short.

"Silence! Would you throw away every advantage by advertising your purpose in that way? Who knows but what the cunning rascals are even now watching us? It's no child's work you have undertaken, as you can see from how they handled Tom, but your chances are doubled so long as you work under cover. Bear that in mind."

This caution was all that was necessary, and in a few minutes more, Judge Bruno knew that

a dozen strong, dare-devil fellows, were guarding him, though unheard and unseen.

By this time Equinox Tom had recovered quite sufficiently to travel unaided. Indeed, he was not much the worse for wear, considering all he had that day undergone. A thumping headache resulted from the heavy blow he had received and hanging so long head downward, while his scalp and face had received a severe scorching. The loss of his hair and beard troubled him most, for that could not be concealed, and he knew that the story of his disgraceful defeat would spread like wildfire. His claim to the chieftainship of Red Rock could not long remain unquestioned, and he saw nothing but breakers ahead.

While Judge Bruno was instructing his men, Equinox Tom recovered his hat, and pulled it down over his ears, then muffled the lower part of his face in a huge handkerchief. But he looked in vain for the judge's revolver. Evidently they had been confiscated by Kostoyeak and his double.

Judge Bruno snapped forth a venomous curse when he was told this, but he still held the revolver borrowed from the man at the cabin, and that would prove sufficient. Despite the confidence with which he spoke to his men, he had little hope of their catching his hated and dreaded foes in the trap now set.

As may be imagined, neither of the two men were much inclined for conversation, and they strode on toward Red Rock in silence, the one brooding over his humiliation, the other using his keen eyes to the best advantage in the faint hope of spying his cunning adversaries.

A sharp cry broke from his lips just before they reached the point where the trails crossed, for he caught a glimpse of a human figure as it glided into a dense clump of bushes not far ahead. Uttering the signal for his men to close in, he sent a couple of shots into the cover in quick succession, rushing forward with Equinox Tom at his elbow.

An indignant shout answered his assault, and the being crashed out of the bushes, revolver in hand, firing as fast as he could work hammer and trigger.

A curse of mingled amazement and chagrin broke from Judge Bruno as he recognized—not Sol Scott nor Dan Brown of Denver, but Old Neb, the Devil's Own!

"Stop shooting, you old fool!" he yelled out, leaping behind the nearest boulder large enough to cover his person. "Don't you see we are friends?"

"Friends be blessed!" spluttered the old man, turning his battery upon Equinox Tom who, unarmed, could only follow the example set by his master. "Friends don't salute a gentleman with lead, when he's out for a quiet promenade. You opened the ball—dance to my music, or surrender yourselves—"

"Shell I lend him one whar he lives, boss?" cried one of the men, his pistol covering Old Neb.

"For your life, no!" shouted Judge Bruno, readily divining the truth. "Keep cover and let him blaze away until he runs down. The old fool couldn't hit a barn, unless he was shut up inside!"

A general laugh followed, for Old Neb's reputation of being the worst shot of any man in the mining country, was well known. Time and again, when strong drink had driven him crazy, he had been known to empty his weapons into a crowd without so much as drawing blood. And now, whenever he sent a shot in one direction, the facetious rascals directly opposite would yell and dodge as though they heard the bullets whistle past them.

But all this was making too much noise, and Judge Bruno called out:

"We surrender, and apologize for our mistake!"

Old Neb was on the point of firing his last shot, but with a low bow, and courtly wave of his left hand, he lowered his weapon and replaced it in his belt.

"Your apology is accepted, gentlemen. In return, I can only express my heartfelt regret if I have injured any of your party—"

"Three killed dead, an' four others mortally wounded—" began a facetious rascal, but Judge Bruno sternly waved him back, and slipped his hand through Old Neb's arm.

"You are going to town?" he asked, with a bland smile, reading the truth in the fictitious bright eyes of the old man. "Good! we can bear each other company. I have been paying the laboratory a visit, and I find an opening there that will exactly suit you, at an advanced salary—"

The judge caught Old Neb's eyes slyly regarding him, so full of malicious cunning that he stopped short, fearing he had overshot his mark. He saw that his fiendish plot had begun to work, but that his game required skillful handling even now.

As the town was neared, Equinox Tom slunk away to reach a place where he could in a measure refit himself, while Judge Bruno, keeping firm hold on Old Neb, led the way directly to his rooms in the hotel.

He laughed lightly as he released the old man's arm and took a couple of half-emptied bottles from the table.

"You are the only gentleman of my acquaintance whom I would dare receive here without asking them to join me in a social glass," he said, unlocking a small door in the wall and depositing the bottles therein. "I know you would take such an invitation as an insult. I honor you for your principle, and regret that my will is not strong enough to suffer me to profit by your example. When fatigued, as now, I must take a drop of brandy."

While speaking, Judge Bruno opened a fresh bottle, and pouring out a glass, held it up between his eye and the window, admiring the rich bead.

"Fourth proof brandy—I keep it solely for medicinal purposes," he added, emptying the glass, then closing the little door but leaving the key in the lock.

During this little bit of adroit acting, he had turned his back partly upon Old Neb, but assumed such a position as enabled him to covertly watch the old man in a small mirror on the wall. He saw that his game was fairly bagged. The mirror faithfully reflected the hungry look that came into the face and eyes of the old man, whose thin nostrils quivered and expanded as he scented the liquor. But the madman had not lost all his cunning, and his face resumed its wonted expression as Judge Bruno turned around.

"As I hinted while coming here, I have a fair business offer to make to you, but I have just remembered an important engagement. If you are not pressed for time, perhaps you wouldn't mind waiting here while I run and postpone it? I'll not be gone long—there are the last papers from Denver—or, if you cannot stop, I'll break my engagement."

"Not on my account," quickly replied Old Neb, fumbling over the papers lest the judge should read aright the sudden light in his eyes. "I only came down for some groceries. I'm in no hurry—take your time!"

Judge Bruno repeated his apologies, then took his departure, laughing inwardly with fiendish joy, for he knew now that his foul scheme was working admirably. Left alone in the room, and having already tasted liquor, he knew that it would be impossible for Old Neb to resist opening the little cupboard. He would drink freely, and his shattered brain would yield. Still, it was barely possible that he might not fall into his old mania of shooting, and to guard against this, the cunning plotter now turned his steps.

He experienced no difficulty in finding the unscrupulous tools he needed, and quickly set the train. Still he was in no haste to return to his victim, and it was nearly an hour before he ran up the stairs to his room, whistling merrily by way of warning to the old man.

Old Neb was seated at the table, his back to the light, his face buried in a paper, but a glance showed Judge Bruno that all was exactly as he could wish. There was a strong smell of brandy in the room, and though the face of Old Neb was even ghastly white, there was a fire in his eyes as he glanced up that told of smoldering insanity.

"I hope you have not found my delay wearisome," said the judge, lightly. "I was detained longer than I expected."

Old Neb mumbled something about finding the papers interesting enough, and the judge continued:

"Then we may as well get to business. You have been thoroughly tested, and we know that you can be trusted as ourselves. We are going to start a branch mint, and need a good man to superintend it. There will be a good deal of responsibility resting upon that man, but the salary—two hundred dollars per month—will make that even. Now the question is, will you accept the position? I don't ask your answer now. Reflect upon it, and let me know your decision to-morrow evening. If you decide to close with our offer, all necessary particulars will be given you then."

"And now to change the subject—I am indebted to you for services rendered, as it is, am I not?"

"Forty dollars—yes," replied Old Neb. "But any time—"

"No time like the present," laughed Judge Bruno, pushing a couple of double eagles across the table. "Of course, as a man of business, you will not object to signing a receipt. I have to keep strict accounts, so that my partner can see at a glance how our business stands."

Judge Bruno procured pen, ink and paper, and wrote out a receipt for the money paid and handed it over to the old lawyer, who read it carefully and suspiciously. As he did so, Bruno rolled the pen across the table, and trying to catch it, knocked it half-way across the room. Old Neb pushed back his chair and arose to recover the pen, and as he did so, Judge Bruno swiftly substituted another paper for the receipt, covering the writing exposed with the blotter, keeping his finger upon it as Old Neb came back and signed his name.

Judge Bruno carelessly pushed a newspaper over all but the freshly written name as he arose, glancing at his watch with an exclamation of surprise.

"So late as that? Dinner must be over, but if you will join me, dear sir, I will order—"

But Old Neb, his brain on fire, was eager to get away. Though he had drained the freshly opened bottle of brandy, the fiery liquor had only increased his thirst, and his throat seemed hissing hot and dry.

Judge Bruno leaned back in his chair and laughed softly as the old man vanished. His face was that of a demon, now that no one was by to see below the mask.

"A good day's work, despite those infernal detectives!" he muttered, picking up the paper signed by Old Neb. "They will balk me in everything I undertake? Let them save him!" and again he laughed in fiendish glee as his eyes ran over the contents of the paper.

It purported to be a full confession of the crime committed by Eleazer Trimble; it established the identity of May Dunwood with Maud Beverley.

"Now let the boys do their work well, and exit 'The Devil's Own' from the stage of life—leaving me a clear field with that dainty little spitfire—curse my breast and fingers—how they tingle and burn!"

Until now Judge Bruno had forgotten his wounds, but he arose and attended to them, dexterously bandaging them.

Scarcely had he finished this, when he started, his eyes aglow, as a wild tumult came to his ears from outside.

"Good!" he laughed, devilishly. "The fun begins! Now guard yourself, Old Neb, the Devil's Own!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE "DEVIL'S OWN" ON A RAMPAGE.

OLD NEB had but one end in view when he left the hotel; that of satisfying his raging thirst. The liquor he had already drank, only intensified instead of appeasing his thirst, while a stranger would never have suspected him of being under the influence of drink. His face seemed fuller, and bore a faint flush that resembled the hue of good health. His form was erect, his step firm and his motions easy and elastic. The only point that could have betrayed him was his eyes: keen and blazing with a reddish-green light, and as never yet shone forth from the brain of a thoroughly sane man.

Straight for the nearest saloon went Old Neb, calling for brandy and tossing down one of his double eagles to be changed.

Few persons now in Red Rock had seen "The Devil's Own" on a "rampage," thanks to the unrelenting guardianship of May Dunwood, but the tradition passed along, and the few loungers about the saloon, opened their eyes and pricked up their ears as Old Neb called for liquor.

"Now you will see fun alive in a holy minute, mate!" enthusiastically whispered Long John Duckworth to an up-country friend of his, just arrived. "When Old Neb hists pizen, there's a he old circus on hand, sure!"

Old Neb caught the purport of this whisper, and it put him on his guard. Instead of having his glass replenished, he gathered up his change and hurriedly left the saloon. But the idle loafers were not to be so easily cheated out of their "fun" which they scented in the air, and followed him in a body.

No surer method could have been taken to bring about an outburst. Old Neb saw that he was followed, and there was enough reason left him to read that curiosity aright. He knew that his only hope lay in immediately turning his back upon the town and its liquor, and he intended to do so—after just one more drink.

It was the same story at the second saloon, and Old Neb left the building with an increased following. The flush deepened on his cheeks, and the signal-light of danger in his eyes grew brighter, as he turned toward the laughing, jeering rabble at his heel.

With a clumsy affectation of terror they scattered and sought cover in the most ridiculous attitudes. As he heard their mocking voices, Old Neb's hand stole toward the freshly reloaded revolvers in his belt, and the red light in his eyes grew more and more intense; but then, like a beautiful phantom, the tearful, pleading face of May Dunwood arose before him, and he fancied he could hear her voice begging him to resist the dreadful temptation, and flee to her.

From first to last, one of his sprees, was like some horrible nightmare. He was dimly conscious of moving and acting, but beyond that he seemed a helpless agent under the influence of some malicious imp of evil. And now, as he hastily entered the first open door, with a vague idea of obeying the spirit voice of his guardian angel by fleeing from the jeering crowd, the truth of this was proved beyond a doubt.

Old Neb saw that he had entered a saloon, and forgot all save the scorching thirst that parched his throat. Only by that strange fire in his eyes could any one tell that he had been drinking heavily, and the bar-tender unhesitatingly handed out the liquor Old Neb called for. With a steady hand, the old man poured his glass full to the brim and raised it to his lips without spilling a drop.

That was the last feather. Instead of the pleading voice of his daughter, a malicious devil was whispering rare things in his ear, and the madman smiled craftily as he cast a swift, sidelong glance from the bar-tender to the men playing cards in the corner. How he could surprise them! Not one suspected the truth, or had the faintest idea that they lived only because he had not yet decided to blindly follow the humorous hints of his bodiless familiar.

If he had only known it, there was no need for Judge Bruno to take so many pains. From the moment that the first drop of liquor passed his lips, Elisha Dunwood was doomed. His downward course might have been a little slower only for the crafty manipulations of the judge, but no more certain. Already the hand of the dipsomaniac was toying with the polished butt of a pistol, and his glowing eyes were selecting a victim among the unsuspecting quartette of card-players, when the tools selected by Judge Bruno completed the part assigned them.

Several pistol shots in swift succession—then oaths and shouts and heavy trampling, from just without the saloon.

"A fight! a fight!" yelled the card-players, leaping up and rushing outside, eager to see the fun.

Close at their heels followed Old Neb, his eyes like living coals, his face white as that of a corpse, his lips parted in a ghastly smile. The dreadful fit was upon him now, and no mortal hand could hold him back.

Two men were rolling over and over in the street, fast locked in each other's arms, growling and snarling like mad beasts, playing their part so well that even their comrades in crime were deceived. The crowd was gathered around, laughing and betting on their respective favorites, all having forgotten Old Neb, save those who were behind the scenes. And they leaped for the nearest cover the instant the dipsomaniac emerged from the saloon.

None too rapidly. Showing his teeth with that horrible smile, Old Neb raised his right hand and sent shot after shot into the astonished crowd. It seemed impossible that even a single ball should fail to find a victim at such short range, but not a cry of pain was mingled with the oaths and exclamations of angry surprise as the crowd hastily scattered. The madman fired to kill, but a merciful spell seemed upon his weapons now, as heretofore, and even as he laughed aloud with devilish triumph in his own room, Judge Bruno seemed doomed to be disappointed.

But he had chosen his tools well. One of them partially arose from his covert, and with a swift, steady aim, fired a single shot. A wild scream of agony followed, and a human form flung up its arms, then fell heavily, shot through the heart.

Long John Duckworth and his friend were among the first who sought cover, and at this shot, the latter uttered an exclamation of wonder—only to have his arm grasped by Long John in warning.

"Not a word—don't be a durn fool! Fergit that you've see'd anythin', an' le's skin out o' here!"

"But it is murder—that man was doing nothing—"

A broad palm closed over his lips, cutting short the indignant speech, just as the assassin leaped to his feet, shouting aloud:

"Lynch the durned cuss! He's killed Tompkins!"

Old Neb saw the unfortunate miner fall, and heard the yell of his assassin. He laughed shrilly, and sending one more bullet after the dodging forms, turned and fled down the street like a startled deer.

This flight, more than the words of the murderer, checked the panic, and with fierce yells and curses, the miners bethought themselves of their weapons. Like the rattling of a skirmish line the pistols exploded, and Old Neb laughed shriller than ever as he heard the ragged lead begin to whistle spitefully around him.

The crowd pressed on in swift pursuit, but Old Neb ran like a deer, his second revolver in his hand, threatening the few men who appeared in his pathway. Luckily for himself, the affray had begun near the outer edge of the business part of Red Rock, and Old Neb instinctively made for the open country. The few houses he must pass were shanties generally deserted by their owners for the day, and of the few persons whom he met, but one offered to arrest his flight, and he dodged prudently aside when Old Neb sent a bullet humming past his ear.

Just beyond the scattered buildings, a small bony horse was lariatied out at grass, and the moment Old Neb saw the animal, he headed for it, his wild appearance and wilder laugh causing the creature to bound away to the end of its rope, in a vain attempt to escape.

Old Neb caught the rope in his hand, and running along it, soon reached the snorting animal. Slipping his revolver into his belt, he drew a knife, and gripping tight to the mane, severed the rope, then flung himself upon the horse's back, turning his head and laughing wildly at his excited pursuers.

"Keep him in sight, while we git hosses and foller!" shouted the man who had fired the

death-shot, putting up his smoking revolver with a fierce curse as he saw the madman ride away unharmed.

There was no use of this caution. Little fear that the man-hunters would desert the trail so soon. A man had been killed—as they believed, by the fugitive—and with them blood called for blood. As long as the faintest hope remained of success, so long would they press on in hot pursuit.

Old Neb was in his glory, now. Long abstinence made him feel the strong drink with double intensity. Brain and body he seemed on fire—instead of blood, molten metal seemed to course through his veins. He tossed his arms aloft and yelled with insane glee, his long white hair floating in the breeze created by his rapid passage. Straight on he rode, caring nothing for road or trail, and as often as the poor beast he bestrode faltered in its stride, or flinched at bush or bowlder, the madman plunged his sharp knife into his haunches, screaming like a demon when the wretched animal plunged on anew in the vain hope of running away from the cruel spur.

Old Neb's mount was a wretched one at best, and a very little of this mad steeple-chasing was enough to settle it. For a few moments the footmen in pursuit were distanced, but the nature of the ground favored them so much that they had little difficulty in keeping the fugitive in view. And ere long, shouts from the direction of Red Rock showed that those who had returned for horses, were mounted and coming on in swift pursuit.

Among the foremost rode Mat Burke, the ruffian to whom Judge Bruno had intrusted the management of this portion of his unscrupulous plans, and the man who had excited Long John Duckworth's friend's indignation by treacherously shooting down poor Peter Tompkins under cover of Old Neb's fusillade.

In this the rascal had acted on his own judgment, though with an eye to his patron's ends. He rid himself of a feared enemy, believing no one would ever know but that Old Neb had fired the fatal shot, and intending to finish up by killing the madman, as ordered by Judge Bruno. Ordinarily a dead shot, in this he had failed. Five shots did he fire at the old man, each one without success. And now, in a wolfish rage, he was urging on his horse to make sure of his victim.

Weirdly that maniacal laugh floated back when Old Neb, beard on shoulder, saw his mounted pursuers. And again his knife shone red in the rays of the afternoon sun as it rose and fell upon the blood-dripping haunches of his laboring mount.

"Spread out so he cain't double onto us!" shouted Mat Burke, plying heel and halter vigorously. "He cain't run much fuder—he's in a trap, sure!"

Nearly every one present understood the meaning of this speech. Directly ahead of the mad rider lay a deep canyon, too wide to leap, too long to skirt when pressed so close. In two minutes more, Old Neb must fall into their hands—and that meant death!

That he had taken this course, ending in "no thoroughfare," proved that the old man was not accountable for his actions, since few men knew the surroundings of Red Rock better than he when in his sober senses. But now he rode straight on, plying his blood-dripping knife, yelling and laughing in a manner to chill the blood of men less excited than those who were mercilessly hunting him to his death.

Straight on until the edge of the canyon is reached, but then the poor horse, trembling with fatigue and pain, stopped short in terror. Loud yells of exultation burst from the pursuers, but changing abruptly to shouts of warning as Old Neb wheeled his horse and dashed straight at them, his revolver out and speaking loudly, his white teeth gleaming as his thin lips curled.

Mat Burke leaped from his horse and dropped behind a rock to make sure of his next shot, but Old Neb, laughing shrilly, wheeled his horse again, and tearing off his coat, flung it over the animal's eyes, blinding it effectually.

Again that cruel knife rose and fell—and then, with a horrible scream, the poor horse fell headlong into the abyss!

CHAPTER XVIII.

JUDGE BRUNO IN A RAGE.

FULL of amazement, not unmixed with a sentiment of horror, the man-hunters witnessed the tragedy they were unable to prevent. Not one among them had the faintest suspicion that the madman would take such a desperate course of baffling his pursuers. They believed he meant to force a passage through their ranks, and scattered, drawing their revolvers to cripple the horse and thus take the mad rider alive, all save bloody-minded Mat Burke. Not until Old Neb whipped off his coat and flung it over the eyes of his terrified mount, did any one among them suspect the frightful truth, and then it was too late for them to do aught.

Straight for the canyon rode the dipsomaniac, yelling and laughing shrilly, plying his blood-dripping knife. To and over the verge—the wretched horse screaming most horribly as it

felt itself falling—the madman laughing—both sounds cut short by a horrible, sickening *thud* that caused the flesh of the man-hunters to crawl with horror.

For a few moments they seemed stupefied, but then Mat Burke laughed harshly as he arose from his covert and strode toward the spot where Old Neb had disappeared. The spell was broken, and the man-hunters crowded forward.

"That's the last o' the 'Devil's Own,' I reckon!" uttered Burke, with a harsh, unfeeling laugh.

There was no reply made by his companions as they gazed in silence down upon the sickening sight. Horse and rider lay in a shapeless heap together, full fifty feet below, and even in the gloom that began to shroud the depths, they could see the rivulets of blood slowly spreading over the white, water-worn rock.

"It saves a good rope an' a power o' trouble, anyhow," added Mat Burke, brutally. "No need to plant the critter, nuther. Turkey-buzzards an' wolves 'll polish them bones clean enough afore mornin'."

"A man that'll talk that-a-way 'bout a dead feller-bein' ain't no man a-tall!" uttered a husky, peculiar voice from close beside the ruffian.

Burke wheeled swiftly, one hand mechanically seeking a weapon, but the speaker did not flinch.

"Tain't no crazy, drunken critter ye've got afore ye now, Mat Burke, but a man as ain't afeared to spit out what comes fust onto his tongue," coolly added the speaker, making no effort to draw a weapon, but with a significant closing of his right hand. "You was the fust one to dodge an' hunt kiver when the old man turned onto ye, but now he's out o' the way o' takin' up yer words, you're bold enough. A critter that kicks a man when he's down, an' dead, ain't fit fer a nigger to wipe his hoofs onto!"

Hard words, but the tone in which they were uttered was even more insulting. Mat Burke turned a sickly yellow, and his blood-shot eyes flashed wickedly as he leaped back a pace, whipping forth a revolver. But rapid as were his actions, those of his rebuker were even more swift.

One quick bound and Burke's pistol-hand was seized and wrenched back with a force that made his sinews snap, then the closed right hand shot forward and struck him fairly between the eyes, knocking the ruffian clear off his feet, and covering his face with a bloody spray.

The old man did not pause to note the effect of his blow, but quickly confronting the excited crowd.

"Hes the dirty cuss got any backers here?" he demanded, sharply. "Ef so, come to the front. Old es I be, an' e'en-a-most a helpless cripple, I kin mop the ground with a dozen sich dirty rapscallions!"

A bold challenge, but no one present cared to accept it. Even by his most intimate associates, Mat Burke was feared and hated rather than liked, and none of them were sorry to see him so neatly served out. Besides, the old man looked like an awkward customer to handle, despite his hump-back and blind eye. There was fire enough in the other orb for a dozen, despite its whisky-swollen surroundings, and rumors had come down from the upper mines that whoever ventured to scratch old "Uncle Billy Beauchamp," would find a Tartar of the purest breed.

One defiant glance around, then the veteran cooled down as rapidly as his temper had risen.

"Tain't my style to kick up a muss, gents, but a sneakin' ccyote always makes my Ebenezer riz. Mind ye, I don't say Old Neb wasn't to blame, though it was bad whisky that did it all, but the pore critter is sarved out now, an' no white man would spit on a dead corpus. 'Twon't hurt none on us to give him a decent plantin', an' that he'll hev, ef I hev to do the work all by my lonesome self."

"I don't mind lending a hand, mate, if there's any way of getting down there except by following the trail he took," said a tall fellow, with a short laugh.

"Mind your eye—Burke's comin' round ag'in!" muttered one of the miners in an undertone. "Less'n a lick like that'll make him burn powder!"

"Ef he kin git the start o' me, all right," chuckled Uncle Billy. "I don't hev to lose time in shuttin' one eye, ye see! But as I don't want to wipe out the critter unless I hev to—char!" and he stripped the fallen ruffian of his belt, flinging it with its armory of weapons across the canyon. "You kin tell him whar his tools be when he wakes up, an' tell him, too, that the old man ain't hard to find by them as means business."

But no one cared to remain behind to console the defeated ruffian after this manner, and the crowd followed Uncle Billy down the edge of the canyon in quest of a point where a descent might be made in safety. This was soon found, and ere long the scene of the tragedy was reached.

A sharp exclamation burst from the veteran's lips, and a look of wonder, almost awe, came

into his face as he hastily stooped over the motionless form of Old Neb.

"Lord above! the critter ain't dead!" he gasped, in amazement, and even as he spoke, an unmistakable *snore* was heard.

Even then the bewildered miners could not believe the truth, for it seemed impossible that mortal man could survive such a terrible leap. To all appearance, every bone in the carcass of the horse was shattered, the body pounded into a shapeless mass—then how could the rider have escaped so entirely that he now lay in a drunken sleep?

Strange, incredible as it may appear, such was the fact. So far as Uncle Billy Beauchamp could discover, Old Neb had escaped without a broken bone or other injury of consequence.*

Almost in awe, those rough men stood by, gazing down upon the man who had experienced such a miraculous escape from what had seemed inevitable death. But this feeling was of short duration. Even among those who had no immediate interest in the death of Old Neb, were some who began to feel that they had been cheated into a display of emotion that made them ridiculous, and one of the men whom Judge Bruno had put to work quickly saw his chance.

"A man that's born to be hung, cain't be rubbed out no other way. Boys, back yander in town lays Pete Tompkins, as white a mate as ever man had, dead, shot down like a mad-dog by this critter. Nor it ain't the fust time he's cut up jest sech capers. We let him go, then, beca'se he was drunk, an' beca'se his gal begged fer his life. You see what comes of it! We kin let him loose ag'in, an' mebbe he'll kill hafe a dozen men the next time. Mebbe it'll be me, mebbe you—ef we're sech pizen fools."

"That's so!" growled more than one surly voice. "Sech a reckless critter ain't fit ter be let loose—nothin' but a stout rope an' a snug noose 'll ever cure him o' sech fits."

"Slow an' easy, gents!" cried Uncle Billy, his one eye flashing as he stood over the unconscious drunkard. "What's up now?"

"We 'low to hang the cuss fer killin' my mate," growled the first speaker, nicknamed "Beauty" Borden, in ironical compliment to his marvelous ugliness of face and feature.

"You know yourself he done it."

"I ain't disputin' that," calmly retorted the veteran, "nor I don't say the onfortunate critter ain't deservin' a rope, but this I do say, an' I'm the man that always stands ready to back up his words. Old Neb is dead drunk. He wouldn't know what he was bein' hung fer, ner he wouldn't even know that he *was* bein' hung, ef ye should string him up now. I ain't sure that prayin' kin do any sich low-down critter a mite o' good, but while my head's hot, he sha'n't be robbed o' that chaine."

"What do *you* mean?" demanded Beauty in turn.

"That you've got to crawl over me afore you lynch a drunken man," was the prompt reply. "You take his part, then—the part o' a murderer?"

"So fur, I do. I'll be one to take him back to town an' lock him up ontel he sobers off, an' then, ef he's found guilty, I'll help pull on the rope that sends him to glory, but ef anybody tries to hang him afore, thar 'll be powder burnt in dead earnest—you hear me?"

"That's fair enough, and you can count me ditto!" said the tall miner, ranging himself alongside Uncle Billy. "Come forward, all men of law and order! No lynch law on a drunken man!"

Several of the more reputable looking miners obeyed the call, and Beauty Borden scowled with rage, for he saw that the golden opportunity was lost. There were only three or four men present on whom he could rely through thick and thin; too few to carry out the sanguinary wishes of his master under the present circumstances. But after all, it did not matter much. As long as Judge Bruno desired the drunkard's death, he would find means to gain his ends in Red Rock as easily as elsewhere.

"It's goin' to a heap o' trouble fer nothin' but a empty idee," he said, retreating from an untenable position as gracefully as possible. "The critter cain't travel on his own legs, an' we've got to tote him all the way, to hang him in the end. But jest as the crowd says. Long's my pore pard's blood is paid fer, I ain't perticklar 'bout a few hours one way or the other."

Uncle Billy made no reply, and the unconscious man was picked up and carried off of the canyon. Only for his heavy breathing, one would have thought him dead, for his muscles were relaxed and he hung a limp, nerveless weight upon their hands as only a corpse or a drunken man can.

Even Uncle Billy was glad when the horses were reached, and mounting one, he support-

* It may well be said that truth is stranger than fiction. I was eye-witness to an incident almost precisely similar to the one recorded, though it occurred years anterior to the date of this story. The dipsomaniac escaped entirely uninjured from a fifty foot fall upon bare rock. As a curious contrast, it may be added that he died in '73, from the effects of a fall from his chair, while in a drunken sleep.—J. E. B., Jr.

ed Old Neb before him until the town was reached.

By common consent the *cortege* halted at a square pen rather than house of logs, and without a word Uncle Billy dismounted and carried the drunkard inside, gently laying him upon a pile of dry grass in the corner. It was not the first time that the structure had answered this purpose, though Red Rock justice was for the most part too swift and sure to stand greatly in need of a jail.

Mat Burke had followed the crowd back to town, nursing his rage together with his rapidly closing eyes. He had borrowed a revolver from one of his cronies, but made no attempt to use it. His vision was fast failing him from the effects of that sledge-hammer blow, and though Uncle Billy Beauchamp hardly vouchsafed him a glance, he saw that the tall miner, known to a few present as Harry Freeman, was keeping one eye on his movements.

He only paused to make sure that Old Neb was taken to the jail, then drew Beauty Borden aside and bade him watch that no attempt was made to steal the drunkard away, after which he hastened at once to the hotel, where Judge Bruno was impatiently awaiting his report.

For evident reasons the arch-plotter did not care to move openly in the affair, and though he had heard the uproar, and knew from the snatches of excited talk that came to his ears from below, that at least one man had been killed, he was on nettles until he could learn the whole truth.

"Well—speak out!" he muttered hoarsely, as he closed the door behind his ruffianly tool. "You did the job? The meddling old fool is dead?"

"Dead drunk—no wuss then that," sullenly growled Burke.

Like an enraged panther Judge Bruno leaped upon the rascal, gripping his throat and shaking him violently, his eyes aglow, his strong features convulsed, an ugly snarling growl hissing through his clinched teeth. Strong as he was, Mat Burke seemed helpless as a child in that mighty grasp, and there was little breath left in his body when Judge Bruno suddenly recollecting himself, released him.

"Come, brace up," he said with a forced smile as Burke dropped into a chair, his throat working convulsively. "I am sorry that I gave way to my temper, and will make amends for it when settling day comes: but you had ought to have known better than jest with me on such a subject. Your life is in danger as well as mine—indeed, while Old Neb lived, not one of the family but wore a rope around his neck. I have positive proof that he was negotiating with the authorities for the betrayal of all our secrets, and for that reason, I wanted him put out of the way."

Mat Burke drew and cocked his revolver before speaking. Judge Bruno flushed hotly; then turned pale as death, as he saw this action. Not with fear, but because he now knew that his cunningly-laid plan had failed just when he deemed success past all doubt.

Burke, warily watching his employer, ready to defend himself in case of another outburst, briefly narrated what had occurred, concealing nothing.

Judge Bruno listened in silence, but with the rage of a merciless demon imprinted upon his face. For some minutes after Burke concluded, he remained silent, seemingly afraid to trust his voice. But then he spoke, slow and coldly, his face like a marble mask.

"This is the first time I ever knew you to botch a job, Burke, but after all, I don't see as you were greatly to blame. You say that Peter Tompkins was killed—by *him*, of course?"

"I kin sw'ar to it, an' so will all the boys."

"Hard on Peter, but lucky for us that Old Neb picked out one of the most popular men in camp," added the judge, with a Satanic smile. "If the right men undertook the job, it oughtn't to be difficult to raise a necktie sociable this evening. Of course I can't stir in the matter—"

Rapid footsteps on the stairs cut short Judge Bruno's speech, and the door was flung violently open, Craig Kimball and Equinox Tom entering. Both of these worthies were much the worse for wear, the face of the former being patched and plastered, his features nearly hidden under bandages, while the Bully of Red Rock was hardly recognizable.

Shorn of his own luxuriant hair and beard, he had donned an old wig and false beard, but these could not conceal his blistered nose or blackened eyes.

"That big devil, Turk Elder, is in town," mumbled the gambler king. "He must be put out of the way—either killed or silenced—"

Judge Bruno leaped from his chair, and took a brace of revolvers from the little cupboard in the wall. He was growing desperate now, as his enemies grew bolder, and began to think less about maintaining the mask he had worn so long and well. He knew that it was a fight for life, and resolved to no longer trust such important work to deputies.

"Come along," he cried. "That rascal knows too much to run loose, but I believe I can checkmate him. Hold yourselves ready for hot work, as he may have backers."

Craig Kimball alone knew all that this last sentence concealed, and though he turned a shade paler, he knew that there could be no flinching now.

Scarcely had they reached the street, when beauty Borden came running up to them, greatly excited, and cried out:

"They're settin' the old man free—turning Old Neb loose!"

A furious curse burst from the lips of the judge, and forgetting the dignified part he had played so long, he rushed at full speed up the street toward the calaboose, closely followed by his comrades in crime.

CHAPTER XIX.

A YOUNG WOMAN'S PLUCK.

It was a heavy heart that May Dunwood bore in her bosom as she left the little log cabin on the plateau and climbed the hill in search of the dainty morsel Old Neb pretended his capricious appetite craved.

Enough has been said to show that her brief life had been an extraordinary one, through which she had been taught self-reliance to an unusual degree, but the events of the past few hours had sadly shaken this. She knew that Judge Bruno was an enemy to be dreaded, and though he had played his part well during the recent interview, she had pierced his mask and fathomed the depths of his black merciless heart. As by instinct she divined his reasons for tampering with Old Neb, and her heart turned sick within her as she feared he had succeeded only too well.

Twice she paused and half-turned to retrace her steps, but as often relinquished the idea. She understood poor Old Neb so well, and knew that by so doing she would betray to him the doubts she felt. That would be the surest way to precipitate the evil she dreaded. He had pledged his word, and drunkard though he was, Old Neb rarely broke that.

"Heaven grant that it may be true! I do not believe—I *will* not believe that he would deceive me thus!" fell almost unconsciously from her lips, betraying the fact that she *did* doubt, even while declaring the contrary.

Past experience told her how little Old Neb was to be trusted when once liquor had passed his lips, but she had watched him so closely now for the old symptoms, without finding them, that she dared to hope Judge Bruno had failed to get any of his devil's brew down the old man's throat. Surely he could not have so completely deceived her.

It was the fresh, bracing mountain air that wrought this change, and before long May Dunwood succeeded in banishing the terrible fears that had haunted her. The world began to look brighter to her now, and the soft color came back to her cheek, and a faint smile played around her lips.

This was not the first time by many that she had taken rifle to hunt down the dinner that yet ran wild in the woods, knowing that the nearly helpless old man must go hungry unless her skill proved more than a match for the cunning of the game she sought. Necessity is a good teacher, and there were few youths of her own age who could have held their own against this dainty little Amazon, either in woodcraft or skill with the weapon she bore.

Slowly she wandered along, her eyes roving over each tree in succession from top to bottom, often pausing and scrutinizing each limb and bough, knowing how cunningly the pine squirrel will hide—the most cunning of all its race.

Other game she found in plenty, but she made no offer to shoot any of these, knowing that Old Neb, when he had taken a fancy to any particular thing, was like a wayward child, not to be appeased by anything else.

For nearly an hour she wandered on without success, but then hastily raised her rifle as she saw a squirrel leap from the ground onto the trunk of a tree, but skillful as she was with the rifle, before she could secure anything like an aim the little animal was gone.

Right well have the mountaineers dubbed the pine squirrel "chain-lightning." Even where seldom or never hunted, they are very wild, taking the alarm at the least unusual noise, and climbing the tree containing their hole so swiftly that the human eye can scarcely follow their motion. And so it was now. A gray flash, seemingly ten times as long as an ordinary squirrel, then a wicked flirt of the white fringed tail as bunny plunged headlong into a hole fifty feet from the ground.

But May Dunwood had hunted the pine squirrel more than once, and rapidly debated the best course to follow. She might not meet with another squirrel for hours, or might stumble across one within a dozen yards, and wisely resolved to make sure of this one.

Carefully marking the position of the hole by a tiny knot near it, she passed along and found a cover among the bushes from whence she could just see the knot, though the hole itself was hidden from her. Experience told her that all squirrels are curious as a woman, and she knew that in a very few moments bunny would crawl up to his door for a cautious peep. And there he would remain for hours, if its enemy were hidden anywhere within range of its keen

vision, only its nose and eyes exposed. That would be enough for such a good shot with the rifle, but even if killed, the squirrel would be knocked back into its hole.

Small game to spend so much time over? No true squirrel hunter would say so, or deem his skill and time wasted. But May Dunwood had other thoughts now. She was anxious to get her game, and return to her father—as she still called Old Neb from force of habit. And it was this delay that played an important part in the history of that day's deeds. Had she succeeded in shooting the game she sought in less time, Old Neb might have been saved.

Crouching low in her ambush, the muzzle of her rifle resting on a forked twig so that it could be brought to bear in an instant, May watched the little knot steadily. Gradually her thoughts wandered. She thought of the dangers that seemed to threaten her, and she reverted to the handsome—for handsome she owned he was, even though an Indian, and blushed charmingly as she made the silent admission—Cherokee who had twice rescued her from insult if not possible peril at the risk of his own life. And she caught herself thinking how musical was his voice, how noble his air, how gracefully yet proudly he had kissed her hand—And then, feeling a vague, strange confusion, she resolutely banished the pleasant vision.

She reverted to Old Neb and his danger, now that Judge Bruno was plotting against his welfare, and she resolved that she would persuade him to abandon their little home and once more become wanderers, as in the days gone by, when they arose in the morning, not knowing where their next meal was to come from, or where they would lay their weary heads when night fell over the earth. But even that would be better than—Hist!

Just above the little knot is its mate in appearance, but May knows that it is endowed with life. Bunny has satisfied himself that the dangerous intruder has gone for good, but is wisely taking one more look to make sure before venturing entirely out of its hole. A slight motion in the bushes is caught by its keen eye, but instead of dodging back, curious bunny pauses for one more look, and so seals his fate. A sharp report, and he hangs head downward for a moment, then with a spasmodic spring, leaps clear of the hole, as they will always do when shot from one side with a rifle, even if killed instantly.

Rapidly reloading her rifle, May secured the squirrel and hastened back to the little cabin. She had been gone so long that she was a little anxious lest Old Neb would have fallen into a fit of the sulks, but not for once did she suspect the truth until she reached and opened the door. Then the blow fell upon her with stunning force.

A low, gasping cry broke from her lips, and the poor girl sunk down upon the floor, burying her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly. She knew now that she had been cruelly deceived from the first, else Old Neb would never have forfeited his word by leaving before her return. He had gone to Red Rock, and there would drink—

"Heaven grant that I may be in time!"

Remembrance of the bitter black past restored her strength, and with only one idea, only one thought, that of saving the unfortunate dipsomaniac from himself, the maiden flew swiftly down the mountain path, leading to Red Rock. Even then she might have been in time to save Old Neb from falling into the net woven for his feet by the cunning fingers of Judge Bruno, but fate decreed otherwise.

Her foot caught in a trailing vine, and poor May was flung headlong against a rough rock beside the narrow trail. A sharp cry that was cut short by a gasping moan—then the maiden, after a convulsive quiver of pain, lay beside the cruel rock like one whom death has paralyzed with a touch of its icy finger. A line of crimson trickled down over her white face. She lay with her left arm doubled up beneath her body in an awkward position.

And as the minutes passed by, there came on the favoring breeze, the faint rattle of firearms from the direction of Red Rock. Judge Bruno's tools had sprung the trap!

The sun was hiding itself behind the pine-fringed hills to the west, when May Dunwood uttered a low moan and opened her eyes, gazing vacantly around her, not yet fairly conscious. Slowly and by degrees the truth came back to her, and she struggled to arise. A sharp cry parted her lips as an agonizing pang shot through her left arm, and a blood-red mist danced before her eyes as she fell back, almost swooning from pain. But mortal bosom never contained a more plucky heart, and remembering how much might be depending on her now, May fought down the deathly sickness and staggered to her feet.

Only for the support lent her by the boulder, she must have fallen again, for all grew black around her, and fire seemed to be consuming her arm as it swung helplessly against the rock. In those few moments she experienced the bitterest pangs of death. But through it all, she remembered her mission—remembered that the old man whom she had believed her father—

the only parent she had ever known—was in mortal peril, from which she alone could rescue him, and this belief enabled her to fight against that terrible faintness, to conquer it in the end.

With firmly clinched teeth and a heroism that would have honored the bravest man, she lifted her shattered arm and thrust the helpless hand into her bosom. Then, with weak and unsteady steps, but unbending will, she staggered on toward Red Rock.

Of that terrible journey, poor May could afterward recall but little, and that little seemed to her like some vaguely horrible nightmare. As one remembers a soul-sickening dream, so she knew that time and again she fell by the wayside as her trembling limbs failed her, only to rise again and struggle on, feeling that on her speedy arrival at Red Rock depended the life of Old Neb.

She could dimly remember entering the town, and how strangely the men she met looked at her. She could remember that once when she fell a rough-looking miner tenderly lifted her from the ground and forced a swallow of some burning liquid into her mouth—and she recalled how she broke away from him in insane terror as she felt that it was whisky—the hellish brew that had been the cause of all her suffering.

She never could recall how she learned that Old Neb was imprisoned in the box-like calaboose, or how she managed to reach it—only to be repulsed by the stern-looking man who stood guard at the heavy slab door. But there were at least two men who would never forget how piteously she pleaded for admittance to her father—the man on guard, and a huge, rough-clad fellow who came briskly forward as he heard her broken, tearful prayer.

"Let the lady inside, can't you?" demanded the latter, a dark frown falling upon his ugly but usually good-humored countenance. "What harm kin she do—a pore, weak critter, hafe dead a'ready?"

"Keep your distance, stranger," cried the guard, threateningly, one hand falling upon a pistol-butt. "I had orders not to let nobody in hyar, on no account—"

"You durn fool! She ain't nobody—she's a lady!" growled Turk Elder, angrily. "An' whar a lady wants to go, she's goin' to go, ef I hev to bu'st things wide open. No ye don't!"

The indignant guard whipped forth his revolver, but he had to deal with no ordinary customer now. Though big and clumsy-looking, Turk Elder was active as a cat, and ignorant of the meaning of the word fear. With a swift bound he was upon the fellow, one arm knocking aside the weapon as it exploded, and then came a dull, sudden *thud* as a bony fist struck the guard fairly between the eyes, knocking him endlong past the corner of the calaboose.

A cry of mingled rage and alarm went up from the few citizens who saw this bold act, attracted by the angry voices, but Turk Elder paid no attention to them. One thrust of his massive shoulders burst the fastenings of the door, and as it swung open, the trembling maiden staggered across the threshold. She saw the motionless form of Old Neb lying upon the straw, all blood-stained, and with a low cry of heartfelt agony she sunk down beside him, senseless.

CHAPTER XX.

TURK ELDER ON THE DEFENSIVE.

TURK ELDER heard that gasping cry, saw the poor girl fall beside the blood-stained body of the man whom she believed dead and in whose behalf she had endured so much suffering, and instinctively stepped over the threshold to lend her the assistance she needed, but from without came loud and threatening cries from the rapidly gathering crowd. He knew that he was in for it now, but there was rare good blood in the rough fellow, and he promptly faced the danger he had so generously incurred.

"Cool an' easy, gents! Don't crowd the mourners," he cried out, stepping forth and pulling the heavy door to behind him. "Thar ain't no harm done beyond knockin' down a dirty cuss in the shape of a man that dared to 'sult a lady—a coward's finger pulled that trigger!" he added sharply, as a pistol exploded and a bullet whistled past his ear, burying itself in the slab door. "Run, ye white livered cur, an' trimble till your j'int's fall apart with fear at hev'in' dared shoot at a man!" he cried tauntingly as the treacherous scoundrel darted behind the shanty opposite, when he saw that his aim had failed him.

This was Beauty Borden, who had recognized the ex-pugilist and hoped to win fresh favor with his two masters by putting him forever out of the way. And he fled at full speed until he encountered Judge Bruno, Craig Kimball and Equinox Tom as described in a former chapter.

These worthies did not pause for more definite information. They heard a loud uproar coming from the direction of the calaboose, and believing that there was an attempt being made to rescue Old Neb, they drew their pistols and rushed to the spot at the top of their speed. But when they reached the scene of the disturbance, a word from Judge Bruno checked his

companions, for a single glance showed him that there was no cause for immediate action.

Turk Elder was still "holding the fort," cool and defiant with his pistols out and ready for use in case of serious "crowding," though his words were conciliatory.

"Now whar's the use in gittin' up on your ears, an' cavortin' round like you all was goin' crazy?" he said, laughingly. "The old critter is in thar, safe enough, dead drunk, an' couldn't run a foot ef his shirt-tail was afire! Whar's the mighty harm in lettin' a lady in to see him—and that lady his own daughter? No man that's hafe white could 'a' found the heart to refuse her, an' she a-crying fit to bust her teenty gizzard wide open. I leave it to you, gents. Could you 'a' stood by an' seen that hog in the shape of a man shove her back with his dirty hand, and not lend him one, just as I did? Ef ye could, peel off your clothes an' git down on all fours an' go rootin' round fer acorns an' grub-worms, as nature 'tended ye should, fer I'll take my davy thar's a curly tail sprouted onto the lower end o' every backbone among ye!"

The sense of humor in an average crowd of miners is not over and above delicate, and Turk Elder could not have spoken more effectively had he wielded the tongue of a Mark Antony. A roar of laughter followed his speech, and Judge Bruno, who came up just in time to note the electrical effect, grated his teeth in sullen rage. He saw that the mob was fairly won over, and cursed his ill luck in not having been near at an earlier moment.

He believed that Turk Elder had recognized both Craig Kimball and himself, though he was not so sure on the latter point. At any rate, the fellow was troublesome and might become dangerous, even if he was not working in the interests of Dan Brown and Sol Scott, the Denver detectives, as his seconding the real or pretended Cherokee chief would seem to indicate.

Judge Bruno knew that he had hard men to fight against, and that either he or they must go to the wall. He was no coward, was playing for an enormous stake, and quickly jumped at the chance of dealing his enemies a heavy blow, feeling confident in the position he had won in Red Rock to carry him safely through.

Little suspecting what was in store, Turk Elder made the most of his lucky hit, adroitly elaborating his humorous illustration, but the sample already given of his not too delicate wit must suffice. Nor was he less happy in his concluding remarks.

The guard whom he had handled so uncereemoniously, had recovered from his stunning blow, but as he saw the pugilist was on his guard, weapons already drawn, he wisely bided his time; Turk addressed him good naturedly:

"Ef I hurt your feelin's, stranger, I'm sorry fer it. Nothin' but to help a lady would make me lift a finger ag'in a man on duty, but I'm ready to make what amends I kin. I'll stan' up an' let ye take a slap at my mug fer pay, an' never dodge ontel we're even on that count. Then, ef ye like, we kin hev it out, man fashion, knock-down-an'-come-ag'in. Or ef ye think I'm too hefty fer ye in the ring, jist name the tools you think you're best on, an' I'll do my purtiest to give ye satisfaction. Kin a man say, or a two legged hog ax more? I leave it to the crowd in general."

As Turk Elder turned toward the crowd for their approval, a short, burly man stepped forth, his face pale but firm-set and resolute. The pugilist eyed him keenly and gripped his weapons more firmly, for he saw that the stranger meant business of some sort.

"Another time you can settle that dispute, sir," uttered the man, in a deep, stern voice. "Just now, I am sorry to say, there is a much graver charge for you to answer. Any attempt at resistance will only make a bad matter worse, and not aid you in the least. Sir, you are my prisoner!"

This unexpected turn of affairs took Turk Elder wholly by surprise, but he quickly rallied and motioned the man back.

"Don't rush things so fast, stranger, or somebody may git hurt," he said quietly, but with an expression in his eyes that warned the fellow to beware. "I ain't a man to kick ag'in the law, but I want to know the why an' wharfore fust. Whar's the charge ag'in me?"

"That's a fair question!" and the hump-backed, one-eyed veteran pushed his way through the crowd. "I don't know the critter from a side o' sole-leather, but he he's showed hisself a white man clean through, an' thar'fo' Uncle Billy Beauchamp is bound to see him git a fair deal."

A sound of approval came from the crowd, the large majority of whom had been won over by the adroit management of the good-natured pugilist, and Turk Elder smiled as he saw that he was assured fair treatment. But that smile was short-lived. He caught a glimpse of Judge Bruno and his companions, and knew that if the blow came from them, as he believed, it would prove serious enough.

"I don't want any trouble, gents," said the stranger, in a deprecating tone, but with his eyes fixed upon Judge Bruno, who gave a short nod, "but when my duty bids me go for a man, he's got to come, alive or dead. Still, if

it will make matters any easier, I don't mind saying that my name is Trego, that I have lately been appointed marshal for this district, and that the charge against this man is that of being a road-agent."

Turk Elder uttered an amused laugh, but he saw that the words had fallen on fruitful soil. A more deadly charge could not be brought against a man, in such a community, and smiles gave place to frowns, approval to suspicion, but the ex-pugilist was good grit.

"The man who hints that I am or ever was a road-agent, kin outlie all creation! Easy—I ain't a-goin' to jump ye jist yit, nor kick over the traces unless ye crowd me too hard; all I ax is a fair deal. Show your proof an' 'thority ef ye kin, an' I'll go 'long with you quiet as a lamb."

Before Trego could answer, Judge Bruno pushed his way through the crowd and answered in his stead.

"I will be responsible for his authority, and as for the charge, I laid that myself. I accuse this fellow of being a road-agent, and a prominent member of the gang that stopped the coach I brought through yesterday."

This stern accusation, coming from one who might almost be termed the King of Red Rock, produced a still greater sensation, and matters began to look dark indeed for the ex-pugilist. But instead of flinching, he laughed softly as he spoke:

"Ef ye kin prove that, I reckon you've got me whar the wool is mighty short, jedge. Ef you wasn't so big an' mighty, I'd say you lied—as it is, I do say you're mistook."

"More than that, gentlemen," continued Judge Bruno, paying no attention to the interruption, "I am ready to swear that not only did I see this man among the road-agents, but I saw him fire the shot that killed poor Dandy Briggs—"

A hoarse cry of anger cut short this speech, and scores of knives and pistols flashed forth in the red rays of the setting sun. The murdered driver had been a prime favorite in Red Rock, and for a moment the life of Turk Elder hung on a thread frail as a spider web. Another word from the lips of Judge Bruno—a hint even, would have sealed his fate, but ere that word could be spoken, Uncle Billy Beauchamp shouted:

"Slow an' easy, boys! don't le's make wild beasts o' ourselves, an' disgrace pore Dandy by stainin' his coffin by blood that mought be innocent! Mind ye, I don't say the overgrewed critter ain't all he's charged with bein', but even ef he is, we've got him corraled so he can't git away. Le's make sure then that he is the varmint we want, an' when it's proved, I'll be the fust to pull on the rope or start the fire to roast the 'sassin'!"

"That's fair enough!" cried stout Harry Freeman. "Give him a fair hearing, and if found guilty, we can award him the punishment he deserves without troubling the marshal further or putting the State to any expense."

Judge Bruno frowned, but when he saw how favorably Freeman's suggestion struck the fickle mob, he was wise enough to yield gracefully, feeling confidence that he still held the winning cards in his hands.

"I'll abide by the test," he said, coldly. "Promise him a fair and impartial hearing, and if I do not prove my charge, I am ready to exchange places with him."

"I ain't a hog to ax any more, an' here's my tools," said Turk Elder with a frank laugh as he held out his pistol belt. "I don't reckon it'll take long to find out on which shoulder the lie rests."

Trego and Uncle Billy Beauchamp took charge of the accused, one on each side. Then came a moment of hesitation, for there was no building in town large enough to accommodate the entire crowd, but a voice called out:

"Settle it here whar all kin see an' hear!"

"I'm agreeable, ef the jedge is," said Turk, adding as Bruno bowed. "Mebbe you'd be so kind as to 'peat the charge?"

"I say that I recognize you as one of the gang that tried to rob the stage last evening—that you fired the shot that killed Dandy Briggs."

"Short an' sweet an' plum' to the p'int!" put in Uncle Billy, nodding his head approvingly. "You photographed his mug, then, in your memory box?"

"The ruffians were all masked, of course, but I can swear to his figure. It is not a common one," was the cold reply.

"It's the best I got, jedge, so don't rub it in too heavy," said the accused, with a good-natured laugh. "Bout what time o' day did you larn all o' this?"

"Five o'clock—possibly ten minutes before or after."

"Good enough! Now ef thar's a squat built critter in this crowd as answers to the name o' Dutch, or Sourkrout—him as keeps the saloon called Rhine Hall, let him come to the front. He's my witness!"

After a brief search in general, it was found that the man whom every one seemed to know, was not present.

"Jedge, you pick one man an' I'll pick another to go fetch the critter. Then thar can't be no

postin' him what evidence to put in," suggested the accused.

Judge Bruno nodded to Equinox Tom, and Elder selected Harry Freeman, who at once set off after the man.

Of the two, while waiting, Turk Elder appeared decidedly the most at ease, laughing and chatting with his two guards, while the crowd began to waver in their belief of his guilt.

An eager shout went up as the mob caught sight of the messengers returning, bearing a human form lying upon a mattress between them. And then, when the crowd made way for them, and the pallet was deposited upon the ground, the Dutchman with difficulty raised himself to a sitting posture, a flood of abuse pouring from his lips as he shook his clinched fist at the accused. And Turk Elder looked abashed as he returned the glance. Truly, a strange witness for a man in such a critical situation to call!

It would be impossible to give an accurate report of what followed in detail, for the Dutchman could not find words hard or foul enough to express his feelings, but on the one essential point he was positive enough.

At noon on the day in question, Turk Elder had entered his saloon, and soon after they sat down to play poker, neither stopping save long enough to drink between deals, until quite dark. By that time, the Dutchman was "cleaned out," and feeling his losses severely, charged Turk with cheating. And then—he pointed to his battered and bruised face, unable to say more.

"'Twas the cussed Rhine wine that done it all, gents," said Turk, sheepishly. "On plain whisky I couldn't 'a' got so low down as to bounce a beer keg like that."

"He may be innocent on this count, but how about that affair at Golconda?" cried aloud a voice from somewhere among the crowd. "Try him on that score!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"THAT GOLCONDA AFFAIR."

JUDGE BRUNO saw that he was foiled, the moment the little Dutchman began his account of the manner in which the accused had spent the afternoon, up to and beyond the time when he was charged with having killed Dandy Briggs, for whatever might be his faults otherwise, the witness was known by all as one whose word was as good as his bond. But his face betrayed nothing of the baffled rage that was seething so fiercely beneath the surface, and his brain was busy searching for some plan by which he might still gain his desired ends, when that voice from the crowd made itself heard.

Turk Elder ceased speaking, and a white, ugly pallor crept over his face as he cast a keen glance from Judge Bruno to where Craig Kimball stood, for he believed that this was a new blow leveled at him by their malice. A stern light came into his eyes, and those who knew him best could have told that he meant mischief now—that he would fight hard and plant his blows heavily.

In this suspicion, however, the ex-pugilist was wrong. The charge was even more a surprise to his two enemies than to himself, and tenfold more disagreeable. Careful as they had been, and cunning as were their disguises, they knew that stern, relentless enemies had hunted them down, and they feared this hint was but the forerunner of an open charge against them. But desperate men will fight hard, and instinctively they moved closer together for mutual support in case the worst should come then.

Not many among the crowd noticed this little bit of by-play, their attention being taken up by the man who had uttered the enigmatical words—a quiet-looking, middle-aged man, in rough mining dress, whom few remembered to have ever seen before.

"Ef thar's anything o' the man at all about ye, step out an' talk plain English," cried Turk Elder, sternly. "No ugly hints from kiver of a crowd—"

"That's not my style," was the cool interruption, and the man stepped forward until inside the cleared space. "I don't want to kick up a muss, but I always like to see crooked things straightened out so that both honest and evil men may get their just deserts."

"We don't keer fer a sarmon jist now, even ef it is Sunday," bluntly interposed Uncle Billy Beauchamp. "Ef you knew anything about this overgrewed critter, spit it out, good or bad."

"I know this: that he was arrested in Golconda, Colorado, last year, and taken to Denver as a road-agent. He was convicted of being one of Major or Captain Owllet's band. If necessary, I am ready to take oath to the truth of what I say."

Turk Elder felt the veteran's gripe tighten upon his shoulder, and smiled ruefully as he encountered Uncle Billy's stern yet reproachful glance. But a growing murmur from the easily swayed mob recalled him to a full sense of his dangerous position, and he boldly faced the threatening storm.

"Gents, tain't my fault that you've got to listen to so much chin-music from me this evenin'. I didn't think o' raisin' sech a bumble-bee's

nest when I tuck the part o' that little lady ag'in' a two-legged hog, but ef it was to do over ag'in, I'd act jist the same.

"Fust comes the judge, who makes a monstrous mistake, as hes bin proved cl'ar enough fer a blind man to see; an' now I git another dab below the belt. But I frankly own that thar's a good deal more show o' truth in what this gent says then in what the judge spouted.

"Long time ago, I 'member listenin' to a preacher who tuck as the backbone o' his sermon, 'open 'fession is good fer the soul.' I cain't sling on the style like he did, but I'll take that fer my text, an' begin by sayin' that the dirtiest trick I ever played, or tried to play, was that same Golcondy affair.

"I hed bin on a long bum when I struck that town, dead bu'sted—shoal on the bar—not enough color 'bout my clothes to buy a smell of an empty beer-keg! But I thought my luck was on the change, when a feller recognized me as one who hed played a tol'able part in the 'squared circle' more'n once in the States.

"He axed me would I like to make a stake, an' you kin bet I didn't wait fer him to ax twice. I own up frank that I didn't keer much what kind of a job it was, an' I said as much when the critter begun pumping me, cautious. A man that don't own a cent in a place where it costs a dollar to sneeze, ain't like to be over partickler, as ye may guess. But all the same, I felt a leetle easier when the critter told me my stake was to be aimed by lickin' a high-toned feller who'd bin makin' himself a leetle too fresh round the camp fer his own health. The wuss I licked the man, the bigger would be my pay, an' nobody'd go into deep mournin' s'pose he never come to when the sponge went up."

Turk paused to catch breath, for he was never a very fluent speaker, and there was a half comical, half-grim smile playing around his lips as he added:

"Ther's one p'int that's puzzled me peskily ever sence that time, gents. You mind the terms o' the barg'in: my pay was to be big in 'portion as I licked the man. Now, I didn't lick him at all—fact I never even hit him one lick—an' yit my pay was what the stranger yender said: a ride to Denver with the darbies on, an' a p'izen close squeeze out of a hemp necktie. What bothers me is to reckon up the reward my kind 'payers would 'a' given me ef I hed licked my man under the turf fer good!"

His manner more than the words he uttered, drew a laugh from the crowd, and the shrewd fellow was quite satisfied. No one knew better than he how much might depend on keeping his jury in a good humor.

Judge Bruno uttered a low but ardent curse, and drew close to his allies. He suspected what was coming, but was wise enough not to invite particular attention by trying to force his way through the close ranks of the crowd.

"Don't draw it out too fine, man," a little impatiently cried Freeman, who stood not far from the gambler king.

"I ain't so proud o' the 'venture," added Turk, with a short, rueful laugh. "Tain't my doin's that I speak 'bout it at all, good Lord knows! But sence it must be, why 'tain't no more'n right that you should see it all, inside as well as out.

"That same night I was tuck pris'ner an' sot astraddle a monstrous rough goin' hoss, my ha's, hoofs and taler all tied up mighty snug, an' the next I knowed, I was in a big cave whar the gang knowed as the Owls randyvoood, and then I found out the man's name I was 'spected to whip—Sol Scott."

A murmur of growing interest ran through the crowd at the mention of this name, for few present but what had heard more or less of the man who bore that title. Turk Elder grinned and mechanically fingered his neck as though the name conjured up some unpleasant twinges.

"I never rightly understood the hull why an' wharfo' o' the matter, an' 'twould take too long to tell it all ef I did, but Sol Scott was brung in a pris'ner, an' made to fight fer his life ag'in' all who keered to tackle him single-handed with the tools they 'lowed they was best at. Only four critters come to the front, an' I was one of them blamed fools—wuss luck on my head!

"Sol Scott broke one man's neck 'rastlin', poked a hole through another with a p'inted ramrod, an' that left only me, for the other feller dropped his tail feathers an' tuk water the wust kind. An' gents, I was licked afore I could tetch the p'izen critter even one time—knocked so clean out o' time that my head didn't git 'one buzzin' fer a full week afterwards! Just how it was done, I cain't fer the life o' me tell, but you who see'd how that Injun handled Windy Thomas—Ef the gents 'll 'journ this court fer ten minutes, I don't mind ef I do!" boldly cried Turk as Equinox Tom cut short his allusion with a curse of rage, and started toward him menacingly.

But Craig Kimball checked his henchman, muttering a few quick words in his ear, and Turk Elder resumed:

"It was hard enough to git licked without a chance to show what I could do, but thar was wuss behind. Afore day come, I was far on my way to Denver, bound an' gagged to be

'livered over to justice as one o' the p'izenist road-agents that ever 'held up' a tenderfoot or went through a hearse! An' to add insult to injury, the man that 'cused me was one o' them as hired me fer big pay to whip Sol Scott! Don Farrar they called him, one o' the big-bugs o' the Denver p'lice force, an' no doubt I'd 'a' bin hung, too, only the double-faced gent come to grief hisself, through Sol Scott an' Dan Brown o' Denver.

"All o' you, I reckon, know them two tuck the Owls into camp, an' riz the price o' rope 'bout fifty per cent, but I didn't l'arn the hull story ontel it was all over. Then Sol Scott come an' sot me free, provin' that I hed never done anythin' wrong enough to desearve hangin' fer.

"The two head toads in the dirty muddle got what they desarved. Don Farrar went to State's prison, whar I s'pose he is now, an' Cap'n Owlet was tuck back East to pull rope fer a murder he done soon after the war."

Judge Bruno drew a long breath of relief and interchanged a quick glance with Craig Kimball as Turk Elder finished his story with these words—a far more favorable ending than either of them had anticipated. And the former said:

"Gentlemen, I am convinced that I made a mistake in charging Mr. Elder with the death of our poor friend Briggs. I ask his pardon. My only excuse lies in his close resemblance in form and voice to the dastardly assassin."

"And I am perfectly satisfied with his explanation concerning the Golconda affair," added the second accuser.

"Don't be in sech a rush, gents!" cried Uncle Billy Beauchamp, as he handed Turk Elder his pistol belt again. "The circus ain't over yit, an' the old man's goin' to fetch in the onequaled trick-mules now!"

A laugh in general followed, but there was no trace of humor or jesting visible in the face of the veteran. His one eye glittered sternly through its red orbit and his peculiar voice rung out harshly.

The red hue faded from Judge Bruno's cheek as a sudden suspicion struck him, and he moved still closer to the gambler king's side, making a covert sign as he did so, and striving to catch Kimball's eye.

"Afore I show up my trick-mules, gents, I want to add a few words to what this man aside me told o' that Golcondy affair. As fur as his knowledge went, he told a straight story, as I kin testify, fur I was in Golcondy at the time, an' hed a squar' peep ahind the scenes, too. But thar's a p'int or two on which he shoots mighty wide o' the center.

"Don Farrar was tried, found guilty an' sentenced to ten years at hard labor; but afore he sarved six months, he made his escape, an' hain't bin recaptured yit, though Dan Brown swore a solemn oath to hunt him down if it took a lifetime.

"So too with Cap'n Owlet, or Fergus Randolph. Sol Scott tuck him back to New York, saw him tried fer murder an' condemned to be hung, but afore the day come round he got free, thanks to his wife—ten thousan' times too good fer sech a low-down, bloody scoundrel!"

Craig Kimball started convulsively at these bitter words, and one hand fell upon his revolver, but Judge Bruno grasped his wrist fiercely, muttering in his ear.

"Don't be a fool! There is a chance for us yef. He may not know all. School your features and brazen it out."

"The news spread quick enough," resumed Uncle Billy, "an' that brung Sol Scott an' Dan Brown together. They jined hands an' swore partnership fer the campaign ag'inst the two convicts, but it was some time afore they struck the right trail—but strike it they did, an' they're mighty nigh the end of it now.

"The two p'izen runaways skun out fer the West, whar most o' the rogues an' a few o' the honest men come, an' fallin' in with each other, went in cahoots in the 'cutest double-barled game you ever see or hearn tell of! Not that they hung up thar two names onto a shingle together; they knowed a trick wuth two o' that. They played they was strangers all the while they was stockin' the keerds fer each other, but they played the game fer all it was wuth.

"One o' them—it was Fergus Randolph onder another name—opened a gamblin' lay-out, while the other trick-mule played pious and respectable, an' on the strength o' that, he opened a bank."

At this juncture a revolver was swiftly raised and discharged from the crowd; a man leaped forward and with one mighty blow, knocked the assassin to the ground, bleeding and senseless. Then, with one foot planted upon the breast of the fallen man, his hands came to a level, each one grasping a cocked revolver.

CHAPTER XXII.

"DAN BROWN AND HIS PARD."

WITH every word that Uncle Billy Beauchamp uttered, Judge Bruno felt that his worst suspicions were being confirmed, and that in the uncouth figure before him he saw disguised one of his mortal foes, Dan Brown or Sol Scott. He felt a mad, blind rage overflowing his heart and mounting to his brain, as the disguised de-

tective came nearer and nearer to the dangerous point, and though he strove hard to crush it down, knowing that such an outburst would be all that was lacking to convict him in the eyes of both friends and foes, the task was beyond his power.

He it was who fired the pistol, and at Uncle Billy Beauchamp, who ducked and dodged aside with remarkable celerity. It was Harry Freeman who leaped forward and delivered the blow that knocked Judge Bruno through the inner circle of the crowd, who swiftly followed and whose ready revolvers covered the hearts of Craig Kimball and Equinox Tom, crying sternly:

"Keep your seats, gentlemen; the show ain't over yet."

Naturally the excitement was intense, and that was a critical moment. But Uncle Billy Beauchamp, Turk Elder and the man who had demanded more light on the Golconda affair, moved forward to Harry Freeman's support, and the frowning battery of "sixes" thus presented had a very calming effect on even the most ardent admirers of the fallen king of Red Rock.

"Hold hard, all!" cried Uncle Billy Beauchamp, his voice ringing out like a trumpet note, in strong contrast to the peculiar tone he had until now used. "You shall have all the circus you want, but first understand who the men are for whom you are so ready to fight, and off whose feet you have been licking the dust as though they were archangels.

"This man, whom you know as Judge Bruno, is Don Farrar, the escaped convict; and yonder stands Captain Owlet, alias Kirk Carmichael, alias Craig Kimball, now under sentence of death for brutally assassinating General Watkins Cowperthwait—"

The gambler king interrupted him with a sharp, contemptuous laugh. He had plenty of brute courage, and now that he knew the worst, he meant to fight his enemies step by step.

"Gentlemen, that fellow is either drunk or crazy—certainly a liar and fool! If the judge and myself were the men he avers, notorious criminals for whose apprehension there are heavy rewards offered, he would have made sure of our arrest before declaring our identity—"

Uncle Billy Beauchamp laughed coldly.

"You are as much my prisoner now, Fergus, Randolph, as though you were ironed hand and foot and the key of the condemned cell turned upon you. You cannot lift a hand or stir a foot save by my consent. A single sign or word from me would place you beside your comrade in crime."

"You dare not repeat those words on equal footing. Unless you are a coward as well as liar, you will give me a chance to make you swallow your foul insinuations."

"Life is not yours to risk," retorted Uncle Billy, while the gambler king uttered a short, insulting laugh, for he saw that he had made a telling hit with the easily swayed crowd.

The veteran saw this, too, and there was a stern ring in his tones as he addressed them.

"Gentlemen, reserve your judgment until you know what manner of scoundrels you have been doing homage to, and bear in mind that I can and will prove every charge I make, plainly enough to satisfy the most skeptical.

"These two men have been shamefully swindling you from beginning to end. The gambling tables of Craig Kimball have been run by the money you intrusted to Judge Bruno as banker—you furnished the capital by means of which you have been systematically fleeced. I know what you will reply—that an exceptionally fair game has been dealt in these houses; but even so, when the tables lost the bankers were still winners.

"That sounds like a paradox, but it can easily be explained, when you know that these high-toned and honorable gentlemen have been running a mint and bank-note printing establishment of their own. Whenever good money was paid in to the bank or across the card tables, it was carefully retired, and their bogus issues took its place—"

At first the hearers were stupefied by this bold charge, but this soon changed to strong excitement, and one of the most prominent business men of the town stepped forward.

"This is a grave charge you make, sir, but what proof have you? You are a stranger to us all, while the gentlemen you accuse have long enjoyed our perfect confidence. That being the case, we have the right to ask your name and credentials. Who and what are you?"

"My name is Dan Brown, and this," touching Harry Freeman on the shoulder, "is Sol Scott, my pard."

A murmur of intense interest ran through the crowd at the mention of these well known names, and many of the miners pressed forward to get a better view of the celebrated detectives. But there were others to whom the announcement sounded like the crack of doom. Faces grew pale, and lips trembled as here and there a man shrunk away with head hanging and blood chilling.

A low laugh broke from the lips of Dan Brown of Denver as he noted this, for a more eloquent tribute to his prowess could hardly have been given.

"I pledge you my professional honor, and reputation, Mr. Morgan, that I can and will prove every charge and specification that I have brought against these men."

"Then arrest them at once! I will aid you, and so will every honest man in town," cried the excited merchant.

"Many thanks, but I need no help," smiled the detective. "All I ask is that the honest portion of Red Rock stand aloof and let me manage matters in my own way. To show my confidence in them, and my faith in my own power, I will frankly give my reasons for acting as I have, and as I intend doing."

At this moment Judge Bruno partially recovered his consciousness, feebly striving to remove the crushing weight from his breast, a bewildered light in his bloodshot eyes. Sol Scott glanced inquiringly toward Dan Brown.

"Let the snake crawl away, pard; but draw his teeth first."

Removing his foot, Sol Scott rapidly searched the fallen King of Red Rock for weapons, then the four bold men fell back a pace or two.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination, gentlemen," resumed Dan Brown of Denver, "to bore you with a long history of my personal affairs, but to fully understand why I have marked out such a peculiar course to follow in this case, I must make a brief mention of my private life as mixed up with the precious scoundrel you have known as Judge Bruno."

"Until I unmasked him in that Golconda affair, Dan Farrar was an official high in the police circle of Denver, and no man was more thought of or held in higher repute than he. He might have worn the mask even yet, had he been content to make haste slowly, for I will do him the justice to say that he was an admirable actor. In common with many others whose business it is to penetrate masks and disguises and read what lies beneath them, I saw him almost daily, yet was so far from suspecting the truth that I gladly welcomed him at my home and treated him more like a brother than a mere business associate."

"A false friend at heart, man never introduced to his wife! And so adroitly did the unscrupulous villain play his part that neither she nor I suspected him until his dastardly work was almost accomplished, with the aid of that man yonder, Craig Kimball as you have known him, and his wife."

A short, insolent laugh from the gambler king, who appeared quite at his ease, interrupted the Denver detective, but no attempt was made to follow it up.

"The plot was this, gentleman," resumed Dan Brown, speaking rapidly as though eager to get through. "My wife possessed quite a fortune in her own right, over which she alone had any legal control. Don Farrar laid his plans to obtain possession of this fortune. I was to be disposed of, and then he would marry my widow. But he knew, or believed he knew that my wife would remain forever true to my memory, unless he could paint me black as the devil himself."

"He took advantage of my being sent away on detective business, and then put his machinery in motion. Cunningly disguised, he visited my wife, and sought to convince her of my base infidelity. It would be too long a story to tell all that he invented and backed up by proofs that seemed indisputable. Enough that he came near ruining my home life forever, thanks to the close resemblance which, when undisguised and with a little making up, yonder scoundrel, Fergus Randolph, bears to myself in face, form and voice. In the end I unmasked him, and was contented to call it even when I saw him sent to State's prison for ten years; but then came the news that he had escaped, and I took the trail at once, vowing to recapture him."

"I mean to keep that vow, but lest the slippery rascal cheat his jailer again, I also swore that he should receive a good share of the punishment his crimes deserve, before the prison doors again closed upon him. I vowed to ruin his best laid plans, one after the other, to thoroughly humiliate him and make him feel that, night and day, he was a haunted man."

"So far in the game I have succeeded quite to my satisfaction. Look at the foul creature you have honored and respected so highly," the detective added, as Judge Bruno slowly and painfully rose to his feet, reeling and trembling like a drunken man from the effects of the terrible blow he had received. "But low as he is now, I mean to drag him still lower—I mean to trample him into the mire, even as he strove to serve me when I was his friend—and if in his fall he drags others, they have only themselves to blame for refusing to believe an honest warning."

An ugly muttering, half-sullen, half-threatening, came from the crowd, and there seemed to be a covert movement as though to rally around the gambler king. There was a scornful smile on the disguised detective's face as he

noted this incipient demonstration, but it suddenly vanished as a shrill cry came from far away among the hills back of town—the wild note of the bald eagle. A single swift glance Dan Brown of Denver cast toward the heavens, then he turned once more to the crowd, his voice hard and incisive.

"To you two, Don Farrar and Fergus Randolph, and to those of your tools, who may still feel inclined to stand by your fortunes, I now give a last warning. You are doomed as surely as though the grave had already closed over you. You cannot escape, and the first sign of attempted flight will be the signal for your arrest. And those who refuse this warning to desert a sinking ship, will perish like rats when their only support founders."

"I know and have marked each man who owns those two convicted felons as their masters. Every move they make is promptly reported to me. I know those who compose the band of road-agents who aided Don Farrar when he foully murdered Dandy Briggs—"

"Can you prove this last charge?" eagerly demanded Morgan.

"In the proper time and place—yes!" was the prompt response. "That is only one of the charges on which Judge Bruno will shortly be tried for his life. He has crimes enough to answer for to hang a dozen men better than himself. Ponder over that, you men who have not yet deserted him. And as a last word, let me say that I am able to more than make my words good. At this moment, there are enough good and true men within hearing to carry this town by storm, if needs be. If you doubt, try it on, as a few among you are tempted to do. Draw one weapon—fire one shot, and I will utter the signal that ends in your death or capture!"

Sharp and clear came the threat, with all the confidence of speech that carries conviction with it, and Dan Brown ran his uncovered eye over the crowd to note the effect of his bold challenge. A smile curled his false mustache as he caught the covert glances interchanged by the conspirators, but it was of brief duration.

Again came the shrill scream of the king of the air, from the same quarter as before, and the Denver detective, could no longer mistake its meaning or importance.

"Bear my warning in mind, gentlemen, for it is the last one you will ever receive on this subject," he said, and then, followed by Sol Scott, Turk Elder and the man who had brought up the Golconda affair, he moved leisurely away from the spot, never once glancing behind him.

And not one hand was lifted to stay his steps.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MAKING USE OF AN ENEMY.

"THAT was Sharp-shooter's signal. Something must have gone wrong!" muttered Dan Brown to Sol Scott as they cleared the town and hastened toward the hills.

"There are others who would like to find out the meaning of that cry," quietly uttered Scott, with a backward nod of his head.

In truth, Equinox Tom, though hardly recognizable in his new guise, was dodging along on their trail, impelled thereto either by his own lust for revenge, or sent by the gambler king, who was shrewd enough to divine that the eagle-cry had been a signal which the detectives were answering.

"Tom—my wits were wool-gathering," responded Dan Brown, something abashed. "We should have—bah! what matter? If the rascal shows too much curiosity, we will lay him by the heels now instead of to-morrow."

"There's no use in running unnecessary risks. I will check the fellow. If you need me, when you have seen the Cherokee, give me notice," added Sol Scott, seating himself upon a convenient bowlder, and coolly inspecting his revolver.

"No row with the fellow just now, Dignan, you remain and keep his hot blood in check," laughed Dan Brown, then hastening on with Turk Elder, and not pausing until the tall form of the Cherokee Chief arose before them.

"Well?" asked Dan Brown, an inquiring look in his eyes.

"It is not well, but bad—very bad," soberly responded Kostoyeak, his face as gloomy as his voice. "Kostoyeak no longer fit to act with men—he feel like a whipped squaw, now."

"There's something happened to the young lawyer?"

The Cherokee nodded shortly, then, like one repeating an unpleasant lesson, he doggedly added:

"Kostoyeak didn't like it much when set to play medicine man over the sick boy. He smelled burning powder in the air, and his heart was hungry for a warrior's share. But Dan Brown knew him best. Kostoyeak not even fit for squaw work."

"Drop that kind of talk, mate, or you and I quarrel," interposed the detective, grasping the Indian's hand and pressing it warmly. "Before I hear what you may have to report, I am satisfied that you are not to blame. I wished you to watch over Reuben Baker, because he needed good care, and his life is important to a portion of the work I have in view. If you

have failed I am sure it is through no fault of your own."

The Cherokee was more pleased with this cordial testimony than he cared to confess, and in a few words as possible he made his report.

It will be remembered that, in an early part of this record, Dan Brown was in the act of examining the body of the young lawyer whom he had so boldly rescued from the outlaws' den, when he was interrupted by the furious outcry announcing the discovery of his bold *ruse*. But the enemy were wholly at a loss, and though they searched high and low, Dan Brown lay close with his new-found ally, who was seriously though not mortally wounded.

He half-carried, half-led him to a secure covert after binding up his wounds, and then hastened to town, where he surprised Judge Bruno and Craig Kimball as already detailed. After this, Kostoyeak was placed as guard and nurse over the wounded lawyer, more to keep him from the throat of the gambler king who had so terribly wronged his sister, than aught else.

About noon on that day, Reuben Baker, with the fastidious appetite of a sick man, expressed a desire for a broiled quail, and Kostoyeak sallied out to procure it. When he returned, Baker was gone! The little cave bore signs of a struggle, and the Cherokee soon discovered from the traces left behind that five men had found and carried the young lawyer away. Taking the trail, he traced it to near the cabin where Judge Bruno had stopped after leaving Old Neb's house, and while reconnoitering, Kostoyeak saw a man leave the shanty and set off toward town. He followed, and watching his chance, took the fellow prisoner, but failing to extort any information from him, placed him in hiding and sought out Dan Brown.

By the time Sharp-shooter finished his report, the spot where his prisoner was stowed away was reached. A sullen, hang-dog looking fellow, who scowled defiance as the disguised detective squatted down beside him and studied his features as though desirous of indelibly imprinting every detail upon his memory.

"Now, my good fellow, I have got you registered," he said at length, "and no artist in the world can alter your appearance so that I could not pick you out from a thousand other rascals."

As he spoke, Dan Brown cut the thongs that held the gag in place, setting the prisoner's tongue at freedom, though it was only after a considerable spell of facial distortion that the fellow got his talking apparatus in running order.

"Ef you talk ontel the crack o' doom, you won't git no dust out o' me," he said, sullenly, "so slit my throat an' make an end of it, durn ye fer a set o' cowardly thieves!"

"Take it cool and easy, my good fellow," and Dan Brown laughed softly as he noted the cunning course the fellow had laid out for himself. "What do you take us for?"

"Fer what ye air—durned thieves an' cut-throats!"

"You should feel at home in our company then, Ben Marlin," and Dan Brown smiled as the rascal started and turned pale. "But I haven't time to waste in bandying left-handed compliments. You see that I know you; to make us on an even footing, look at me close and remember that I am Dan Brown of Denver."

The rascal did not lack a certain amount of grit, and after that first start, showed no sign of confusion or uneasiness.

"Dan Brown or Dan Devil, it makes little odds to me. Ef you ain't a thief, what am I in this fix fer? I've never went ag'inst the law. I'm a honest digger, an' no man kin say wuss ag'inst me than that I'm a unlucky sort o' cuss."

"I can tell a straighter story than that, Ben Marlin," the detective coolly interposed. "I can explain why you left Omaha between two days, but there is no need of going quite so far back. You were one of the gang that aided Judge Bruno in playing that bold game with the stage yesterday. You were one of the men who stood beside the secret door in the Hogan ranch and shot down the prisoner you took from the stage, thinking it was me. You are one of the force employed by Bruno and Kimball in their counterfeiting den over to the north, and one of those whom the self-styled judge sent out to find and kill or capture the men who handled Equinox Tom so roughly."

Strong-nerved though the rascal was, he could not help betraying amazement and fear as the detective made these pointed charges. His face turned greenish-yellow, and he was forced to moisten his parched lips before he could speak.

"It's all a lie—I ain't the man you think—"

"Stop—lies won't save your hide this time; nothing but the simple truth will serve your turn and keep your throat from the hangman's noose. It may help you to realize this when I say that I have just come from unmasking the high-toned scoundrels you have served as Judge Bruno and Craig Kimball. They have reached the end of their rope, and will both hang, sure as the sun that has sunk behind that hill will rise again to-morrow morning. If you keep them company, it will be your fault, and be-

cause you foolishly refuse to profit by the chance I am about to give you."

"How kin I know you ain't lyin' jist to trap me?" suddenly demanded Marlin, adding quickly: "Mind; I don't own up to nothin'. So fur's I'm consarned, you're yelpin' on the wrong trail."

"I've already told you who and what you are, and I am not in the habit of blundering. I have proof enough to hang you a dozen times over, if you had that many lives, but I am running down bigger game, and can afford to let you slide, provided you act according to my orders."

"What be they?" sullenly demanded the prisoner.

"You fellows managed to discover the young fellow I helped to escape last night, and have him prisoner in the cabin where you work Judge Bruno's private mint. You were sent to Red Rock to carry the news and learn what must be done with him. Am I right so far?"

"Go on," muttered Ben Marlin.

"I have force enough to storm your den and rescue the prisoner, but don't care about changing the plans I have already formed, and I count on you to save me that trouble. I will set you free. You will return to the cabin and say that Judge Bruno bade them send the captive, guarded by two men, across lots to the Hogan ranch, there to be kept in the hole back of the house until he can come. Do this, and I will attend to the rest."

"S'posin' I do this, what'll be my pay?"

"Your life and liberty."

"I'll do it!" eagerly cried the prisoner, his eyes glowing.

A low, scornful laugh broke from the detective's lips.

"You'll never win success as a scoundrel until you can control your eyes better than that, old man. You have promised; now let me tell you what will be the penalty of playing me false. I swear that I will hunt you down, no matter where you try to hide. If necessary I will drop everything else, and never know rest until I have brought you to the gallows. You know something of me, and know that I have earned the reputation of always keeping any oath I may make. Now will you repeat your promise?"

"Ef you sw'ar not to arrest me with the others—yes."

"It will be your own fault if I do. Deliver my message as though it came from Judge Bruno, and see that Baker is sent out for Hogan's with no more than two men, then make yourself scarce as quick as possible. Don't stop within a hundred miles of Red Rock, and try to lead a more honest life. Roguery don't pay nowadays."

The rascal was thoroughly cowed, and Dan Brown felt sure that he would not attempt any treachery against him. Tersely repeating his instructions, he severed his bonds, restored his weapons and bade him set out.

A low signal brought Sol Scott and Charles Dingan to the spot. Dan Brown hurriedly explained what he had accomplished, then added:

"Sharp-shooter and Turk will be all the aid I require. Do you two return to town, but keep as dark as you can. I am not sure that those rascals will be contented with the check we gave them. They may try to raise trouble again over Old Neb. I hate to run the risk, but I can't desert young Baker. I'll be back as soon as possible, and in a new disguise. It may be as well for you two to make up afresh. If recognized, some ugly rascal may try to slip a knife between your ribs to get even."

This warning given, Dan Brown and his two allies glided after Ben Marlin through the deepening gloom, and half an hour later the trio were crouching down in the same ambush occupied a few hours earlier in the day by Equinox Tom.

They were not kept long in suspense. Ben Marlin had been thoroughly frightened, and played the part assigned him to perfection. Three men, one walking in the middle with evident difficulty, left the cabin and ascended the hill, following the trail that led close beside the split-pine. And as they reached the thicket, three men leaped from the bushes, striking swift and sure with their revolver butts.

The two outlaws fell without cry or groan, and Dan Brown's voice quickly assured Reuben Baker that he was with friends.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JUDGE BRUNO GETS IN HIS WORK.

JUDGE BRUNO lay upon the bed in the gambler king's house, still faint and dizzy-headed, but looking greatly improved over what he was when borne thither like a dying man. A truly terrific blow he had received from the powerful arm of Sol Scott; one that would have killed nine men out of ten, but all the fight was not yet knocked out of the plucky rascal's brain.

Though both hating and fearing him, Kate Kimball had worked faithfully to restore the judge, and satisfied that he was rapidly recovering, she turned to her husband and renewed her entreaties for him to flee from Red Rock before worse came of it.

"Go now—at once—before it is too late! With

those terrible human bloodhounds on your track to remain here is suicide! Go—never think of me. I will manage to rejoin you, with what I can gather from the wreck. Go—I beg of you by the love you bear me! An hour's delay may be fatal. Oh, Fergus, did I ever counsel you wrongly?"

Judge Bruno raised himself up in bed with a harsh curse of rage and said:

"Stop that infernal nonsense! There is only one course for us to follow now, and that is straight forward. To falter or turn back will be ruin—worse than ruin—death at the hands of the hangman! If we act boldly now, all may go well. Dan Brown is not ready for hot work, or he would have struck us without a warning. He has been forced to show his hand prematurely, and if he had more than those four men to back him he would have arrested us to-day. He may have sent for more aid—I believe he has, for in no other manner can I explain his delay. And before they come we must win the game or perish!"

"Talk is easy," muttered the gambler king, gloomily.

"Then help me to act," sternly cried the judge. "You have seen enough of those bloodhounds to know that it is their death or ours. As for flight, that is out of the question now. Those devils are too cunning not to guard against that, the very trap into which they hoped we would run our heads. They know we have too many friends for them to arrest us here, without a greater force than they can command, but should we try to steal away, they would pounce upon us, one by one, and smuggle us far beyond the reach of our allies before the truth was known."

Craig Kimball at once saw the force of this reasoning and a dogged expression came into his eyes that filled the anxious heart of his too faithful wife with despair.

"Trust him not, husband," she sobbed, clinging to the gambler's neck, her eyes streaming with bitter tears, but Kimball put her firmly, almost sternly away.

"He is right, Kate, in this. We cannot flee—we must fight it out to the bitter end."

"Good!" exclaimed Judge Bruno, rising from the bed as though these words had restored all his wonted energy. "That sounds more like old times. (Get another bottle of brandy. My head buzzes like a hornets' nest, and I've got to set it level some way."

Craig Kimball brought the liquor and placed it upon the table, then the trio assumed much the positions they had occupied four-and-twenty hours before, and when, a little later, they had been so completely surprised by the enemy.

Judge Bruno emptied a glass of undiluted brandy, then leaning forward upon the table, spoke in a low, resolute tone.

"We have decided to make the best fight we can. Now for the programme. Why was it that Dan Brown threw off his disguise? Not because he was ready to do so, but because he was forced into that course or run the risk of being lynched along with the man he was obliged to defend."

"You remember what Equinox Tom said about that pretended Cherokee and May Dunwood: the last time he saw them together they were making hot love. That Cherokee was Sol Scott in disguise—for no Indian could have pounded Tom to a standstill as he did, last night. I am perfectly satisfied on that point."

"Now he is quite as much to be dreaded as Dan Brown; they are partners, and what one does, the other will back up without hesitation. If Sol Scott is in love with that girl, as the story told by Equinox would seem to prove, then any attack on the calaboose where she is with Old Neb will be the surest way of getting him to the front again, when we are all prepared for them."

Judge Bruno paused to pour out and drink another glass of brandy, watching the eyes of his ally keenly. But he saw no answering gleam of intelligence, only a dull, doubting expression, and impatiently added:

"Are your brains addled, that you fail to catch my meaning? Say a mob is raised that will attack the jail to lynch Old Neb. Won't Sol Scott interfere to save him? And if he does, will Dan Brown hold back? There will be Turk Elder and that other rascal to back them; possibly more, but if we can dispose of the two first, the rest will be easily handled."

"How many times have we tried to settle those two demons, and shamefully failed?" growled the gambler king.

"And learned a lesson each time, by which I mean to profit now," declared Bruno. "I will have half a dozen sure shots holding themselves in readiness to pick off the men I point out, and if they do show up in defense of Old Neb, I will swear to kill either Sol Scott or Dan Brown with my own hand—if possible both of them."

"It may work," slowly responded Kimball. "But they will be in disguise and on the lookout—"

"Of course it will not be an easy job, but we are in a bad box and must take some long chances if we ever get out of it with whole skins. Disguised ourselves—"

Craig Kimball laughed bitterly as he touched

his bandaged face. There was no need of words.

"True, you couldn't hide that badge very well, but even that can be provided for. We will need all the aid we can get, and you can steal away in the darkness to carry the word to the boys at the mint—"

"Only a few minutes ago you declared that any attempt to leave the town would be followed by arrest!" suspiciously exclaimed the gambler's wife.

"Go or send a trusty hand, I care not," impatiently cried Judge Bruno. "Let the boys be here to second me, and I care nothing how they get the word. There is no time to lose. Do your part, old man, and by this time tomorrow we will again be the masters of Red Rock!"

His confidence was contagious, and despite the tearful pleadings of his wife, Craig Kimball bore Judge Bruno company when he left the house, both keeping a keen look-out and hards on weapons until they entered another building at the rear of one of the gambling bells.

Half an hour afterward two men emerged, but it would have taken an exceptionally cunning eye to identify them with the twain who had entered the building.

Craig Kimball, despite the confidence expressed by Judge Bruno in his bold scheme, felt that there would be less danger in leaving town to carry the word to the men at the mint, than in remaining, and after making a few adroit doubles to satisfy himself that there was no spy upon his track, he stole away from town and hastened through the shadow shrouded hills.

Judge Bruno settled down to work after a manner far more congenial to his bulldog nature, and with a certain gusto he had not experienced of late. His role as a respectable, "solid" citizen had been uncongenial from the first, though he had played his part admirably, and while well aware that he was engaged in a fight where there was no medium between victory and death, he felt a fierce, bloodthirsty joy hard to describe.

The first man he sought out was Equinox Tom, whom he knew he could thoroughly trust in a merciless campaign against those who had so ridiculously abused him. A few words set the bully of Red Rock to work, and from man to man they went, steadily gaining ground against the impression made by Dan Brown.

The plan proposed was such a simple one that perfect success seemed assured. The detectives would not allow Old Neb to be carried away and lynched without interfering in his behalf, and it was equally certain that they would try argument and persuasion before resorting to brute force, knowing how that must end—in the death or defeat of one of the parties. And then, while the parleying was going on, what easier than for the chosen marksmen to forever silence the troublesome detectives.

The situation was desperate and called for desperate remedies. Put in this shape by the eloquent tongue of Judge Bruno, backed up by Equinox Tom, Mat Burke and Beauty Borden, it seemed a marvel of certainty and ease, and all wondered why they had not thought of it before. Ally after ally was gained over, well primed with whisky, and then Equinox Tom, who had command of the body of lynchers, gave the signal to gather at the jail.

Judge Bruno had particularly cautioned each one of his sharpshooters and placed them in position. He knew that he could depend upon their carrying out instructions and confident in his thorough disguise he prepared to join in the rush upon the guard.

There was little delay after all preparations were completed, and the half-dozen guards whom Morgan and other leading citizens had placed at the jail, were disagreeably aroused to a sense of their danger as Equinox Tom shouted forth the signal that hurled the mob upon them, in a stentorian voice that could be heard for a mile.

Before they could draw a weapon or even seek safety in flight, the yelling lynchers knocked them down and trampled them under foot as they rushed against the door, dashing it from its hinges.

A piercing shriek came from the interior, and as several dark lanterns flashed their light upon the scene, May Dunwood was revealed kneeling beside Old Neb, who still lay in a drunken stupor, her uninjured arm thrown over him as though that frail defense could avail aught against the horde of cursing, blaspheming ruffians, whose powder blackened faces rendered them all the more horrible and repulsive in the red glare.

Judge Bruno tingled in every nerve as that shriek rung out, and with ready revolver he glared around him for the detectives, feeling sure that they would not fail to answer that eloquent appeal, but the dipsomaniac was dragged out into the open air, May still clinging to him and piteously begging the raging brutes to have mercy, and still no sign came from either Sol Scott or Dan Brown.

Then—with an indignant cry, a tall man bounded through the crowd, and dashed aside the men who grasped Old Neb. With a howl of devilish exultation, Judge Bruno fired, and

as the brave fellow reeled and fell, with a hollow groan, he leaped forward and caught the half-fainting maiden in his arms, leaping back around the corner of the building where the gloom was doubly intense by force of contrast.

But before he had taken a dozen steps, a tall form uprose beside him, and the butt of a heavy revolver crashed down upon his head, beating him to the ground.

CHAPTER XXV.

"A NECKTIE FESTIVAL."

FOR a moment the mob parted and fell back from the spot where Old Neb and the murdered man lay, expecting an avenging volley from the dead man's friends, but none such came. It seemed as though his tragic fate had cowed his comrades—for hardly a man present but believed the fallen man was either Dan Brown or Sol Scott.

Equinox Tom quickly rallied, and with a yell of devilish exultation leaped high into the air, as he descended, driving his heels with blood-curdling ferocity into the face of the murdered man, then catching up the emaciated form of Old Neb and slinging it across his shoulder.

"Come on, boys!" he shouted, with a horrible laugh. "I've got the p'izen cuss as 'sassinated pore Pete Tompkins, an' over yender is the death tree an' the rope waitin' fer its supper!"

The yell was answered back, and the mob closed in around the speaker, all looking for another and more desperate attack, the sharpshooters still lying low on the outskirts with their weapons in readiness. But the expected attempt at rescue did not take place just then, and it appeared as though the detectives had penetrated the cunning trap set for them.

Equinox Tom glared around him with wolfish ferocity, feeling himself shamefully defrauded of his just dues. True he believed that one of his enemies had fallen, but he had counted on making a clean sweep. Still he did not utterly despair. Surely those men—bold and fearless—would not stand by and see Old Neb hung without raising a hand in his defense?

"On to the hangin' tree, boys!" he shouted, bearing his helpless captive without seeming to feel the burden. "The innercent blood o' Pete Tompkins calls aloud fer vengeance on his murderer! Cl'ar the track, thar!"

In his right hand he held a revolver ready for instant work, and was in no hurry to clear the town, giving the enemy ample time to make another demonstration in Old Neb's favor should they so desire. But only the shouts and cries of his own allies rose around him, like hungry wolves whose appetite has only been whetted by the taste of blood.

Like nearly every mining town of any pretensions, Red Rock had a convenient tree that had been dedicated to the use of those criminals whose crimes were of deep enough dye to merit a "hempen cravat," thus saving the community the expense of a regular gallows, and which was popularly known as the hangman's tree, or lynchers' oak.

Toward this ill-omened ornament of nature, the mob under command of Equinox Tom now moved, on the guard against an attack, not one of them having noticed the mishap which had befallen Judge Bruno, or suspecting that he still lay in the shadow back of the calaboose, his white face staring up toward the star-gemmed heavens, just as he had fallen beneath that swift and deadly blow.

The distance to the death-tree was not great, and though Equinox Tom moderated his pace to a slow walk, the intervening distance was covered without a hand being raised to preserve the helpless old man from the dread fate that threatened him.

A huge, wide-spreading white oak tree, the beneath whose branches bare of grass or ground undergrowth, beaten hard and smooth by the many feet that had so often danced in ferocious glee while the helpless victim of lynch-law was writhing in the agonies of a slow strangulation above their heads. All around was scattered bushes and smaller trees, with here and there a foot or bridle path.

With a snarling curse Equinox Tom rudely tossed his helpless captive to the ground beneath the death tree.

"Hustle around an' git bresh fer a fire," he called out. "We all want to see the fun, an' it'd be a durned shame fer the old cuss to die without light enough fer to see hisself kick! Couple o' you fellers see ef you cain't fetch him to. Hangin' a dead-drunk critter ain't much more fun than hangin' up cold meat."

Just now Equinox Tom's word was law. The orders of Judge Bruno for the time being were sufficient to obliterate the memory of the successive defeats which the Bully of Red Rock had undergone during the last few hours, and the lynchers obeyed him without hesitation.

There was no lack of fuel scattered around, and in a very few minutes a huge bonfire was blazing up in the cleared space. By its light, men were endeavoring to restore Old Neb to consciousness, though for a time with little prospect of success.

When they saw the lynchers moving away unmolested after the death of the only man

who dared to raise a hand in defense of the unfortunate couple, the sharpshooters followed after, still watchful, eager to win the reward offered them by Judge Bruno for the death of Dan Brown and Sol Scott.

Equinox Tom noted this, and as he turned Old Neb over to the care of his men, he made a quick signal with his hand, and withdrawing from the clear spot beneath the tree, he joined Beauty Borden and Mat Burke, two of the head ones detailed for that special duty.

The mass of the lynchers were ignorant of this secret plotting, only those being trusted who knew that they were under the shadow of the scaffold as long as the two detectives drew the breath of life. Those who had less at stake would hardly have joined the mob had they known what their leaders were working and hoping for.

"We've slipped upon it so fur," muttered Equinox Tom in a guarded tone. "Only one critter rubbed out—Sol Scott, I reckon. But thar's a chance fer more music yit, ef we play our keards right. Dan Brown ain't the man to take sech a desp'rit bluff as we're givin' him."

"You tell the boys the jedge picked out, to hunker down in ambush, an' make sure of who-ever tries to stop the fun. Ef we kin git the old man back to his senses, I reckon we kin skeer him into doin' some tall beggin' fer his life, an' ef Dan Brown is anywhar nigh, he's bound to take a hand in. You understand? You're to shoot any an' every man that tries to stop the hangin', whether he or they look like Dan Brown or not—the cunnin' devil kin change his git-up so his own wife wouldn't know him."

"Ef he comes, he won't go away ag'in on his own legs," growled Mat Burke, remembering how unceremoniously the detective, while masquerading as Uncle Billy Beauchamp, had handled him. "I never yit failed to pay a man with double interest all that I owed him."

"Do as good now, an' your pocket will be all the heavier fer the powder burned. Go an' let the boys know, an' take to kiver. I'll make the old man squeal fer help ef I kin."

Equinox Tom left the two rascals and re-entered the opening.

Not a little to his grim satisfaction he saw that Old Neb was beginning to show signs of returning consciousness under the rude ministrations of the two ruffians.

Under ordinary circumstances his drunken stupor would have lasted for two or three days, but his terrible leap into the canyon had shaken him up thoroughly, and May had not been idle since reaching his side.

When the detectives beat a retreat in answer to the signal of Kostoyeak the Cherokee, Morgan and other reputable citizens had entered the calaboose, and when they discovered how the maiden was injured, a surgeon was quickly summoned who skillfully set and bandaged her broken arm. Morgan desired to remove her to his house, where she could receive the care she so sadly needed, but the faithful girl refused to leave Old Neb even for a moment, and guided by her knowledge of the peculiar conditions which invariably followed one of these wild fits on Old Neb's part, the doctor gave her some drugs which she carefully administered until the mob broke in upon them.

Thanks to all this, the dipsomaniac was now recovering his senses, and in a few minutes more was able to sit up unsupported. But there was absolutely no trace of emotion in his haggard face as his blood-shot eyes roved listlessly over the crowd of repulsive faces, rendered doubly so by their masks of moistened powder glistening in the red glare of the crackling fire. Nor did he change countenance when Equinox Tom dangled the prepared noose in his face.

"Say your prars, old man, ef ye hain't forgot how they run," he said, with a brutal laugh. "Time is mighty short fer you now. You killed the whitest man that ever drawed breath—shot him down from ahind without givin' him a chance fer his life—an' his blood calls for vengeance!"

Old Neb looked up into the bully's face, but his own countenance was a perfect blank. Either his wits had not returned with his consciousness, or else he was counterfeiting idiocy with admirable skill.

Ever suspicious, Equinox Tom believed the last was the case, and an angry laugh broke from his lips.

"Fix the rope, boys," he cried, tossing the noose end to the nearest man. "The old fool thinks we are jest tryin' to skeer him, instead o' bein' in dead airnest. We'll soon settle that!"

The long, stout rope was coiled up and flung over a limb that grew horizontally from the huge trunk, about twenty feet above the earth. A score of willing hands seized one end of the rope, while Equinox Tom grasped Old Neb by the arm and dragged him rudely beneath the dangling noose.

With fingers that had acted in a similar capacity more than once, the bully slipped the noose over the prisoner's head and fitted it snugly around his neck; but even then that dead, lack-luster look remained in Old Neb's eyes, nor did the faintest trace of emotion show itself

upon his withered, haggard, deathly-pale face. It was as though he was dead to all outward sensations, and even Equinox Tom shivered slightly as his hand touched his victim's cheek, it felt so dank and clammy—like that of a galvanized corpse. But he angrily banished the emotion, and said:

"Time's 'bout up, old coon. Hev ye any last word—any partin' word or message to send to your daughter?"

It was an artful effort, but even this failed. Old Neb stood with the noose around his neck, cold and insensible.

The bully of Red Rock fairly boiled over with fury. He had counted on extorting cries and pleadings for mercy from the old man's lips, not because he bore him such bitter hatred, but in hopes that his enemies might be led into the trap he had set in expectation of capturing them. But he saw now that this hope was gone, and choking with anger, he cried:

"Walk away with the rope, lads, but slowly—don't break the old critter's neck. We'll hev the fun o' seein' him kick, anyway!"

In obedience to this command, the men walked leisurely away with the end of the rope, drawing Old Neb from his feet. But though his arms were left at liberty, they hung limp and motionless by his side, the body slowly swinging around as the weight stretched the different strands, but not even a tremor or quiver agitated the body of the dead-alive man.

At this instant, when all eyes were turned upon the body that dangled between heaven and earth, a horseman dashed into the cleared space—there was a quick gleam of bright steel in the firelight—and then, bearing the limp form of Old Neb upon one arm, the daring rider plunged ahead into the bushes, a wild scream of agony following his passage, while a mocking laugh floated back, with the words:

"DAN BROWN'S COMPLIMENTS TO YOU, GENTLEMEN!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A BRIDE FOR SALE.

FOR hours Judge Bruno had been lying upon the bed in his chamber at the hotel, in a heavy sleep that was almost stupor, without moving limb or muscle, but now he started abruptly into life and action, thrusting one hand beneath the pillow where he always kept his revolver and glaring toward the door as it swung open, the desperation of a cornered wild beast glowing in his swollen, discolored eyes.

A low, careless laugh was the only response to this hostile demonstration, and the mingled rage and despair which the judge experienced at failing to find the weapon he sought, gave place to far more agreeable feelings as he recognized the bandaged face of the gambler king.

Craig Kimball closed the door behind him and turned the key, then drew a chair nearer the bedside, sitting down. A short, mocking laugh parted his lips as he closely surveyed the bruised and livid face of the judge.

"A gay and festive looking pair, ain't we? Painted in every color of the rainbow, and improving every hour. It would be hard to decide which of us should have the blue ribbon for ornamental beauty and variety of expression!"

A low, fierce growl from Judge Bruno warned the gambler king that he was treading on dangerous ground. In fact the judge was just beginning to recall some of the incidents of the past night, and to realize that once more he had made a miserable failure of what he had believed a sure thing. Slowly it came back to him: the charge upon the calaboose, the helpless victim and his pleading child, the bold dash of the man whom he believed to be either Dan Brown or Sol Scott, the certainty which he felt of having sent a bullet crashing through the fellow's brain, the snatching May Dunwood away, and then that terrible blow from some unrecognized enemy, after which all was a horrible blank until just now, when he was aroused by the noise of Craig Kimball's entrance. Surely he and his men must have been completely and disastrously defeated, and yet—Both Kimball and himself were alive and free. Matters might not be so bad. Surely there was a smile on the gambler's face?

"Speak out, curse you!" he cried with a fierce energy as he raised himself upon one elbow and glared into the discolored eyes of his ally.

"How did things work last night? Tell me the worst in a breath."

"How much do you remember? No one seems to know when you were rocked to sleep, though I can give a pretty shrewd guess, for I was the man who found you, and took a bit of calico from between your fingers—no easy job, and I thought it a death-grip at first."

He paused, cut short by a flood of curses as Judge Bruno recalled how his prey had been snatched from his hands even in the moment of his triumph. But he suddenly regained sufficient self-control to state the part he had played in the tragedy.

"You can thank your lucky stars that you were thoroughly disguised, and that you made such a rapid disappearance after firing that

shot," said Craig Kimball, earnestly. "Have you any idea who it was you shot down?"

"Either Dan Brown or Sol Scott—"

A bitter laugh by the gambler king cut short this speech.

"Neither one nor the other, but the only son and heir of old Morgan! The old couple are nearly crazy over it, and already there is an offer posted all over town, of ten thousand dollars for the arrest of the murderer!"

Judge Bruno fell back upon his pillow, speechless with rage and chagrin, while his Job's comforter resumed:

"It's a big pile of money, and some of the boys will have to fight hard to resist the temptation of winning it by a word or two. If that word is spoken, judge, I fear salt won't save you. The whole town is up in arms about it, for you know what a general favorite Harry Morgan was."

A fierce, grating curse from Judge Bruno warned Craig Kimball not to press him too far, and he changed the subject.

"You sent me to call in the boys from the mint, and I obeyed orders, but while there, I learned one thing that surprised me. Yesterday some of the men, while hunting for the Cherokee, stumbled across Reuben Baker, and taking him prisoner, carried him to the mint, then sent out Ben Marlin to receive your instructions. What did you tell him?"

"What the devil do you mean? I haven't seen Ben Marlin, nor did I know that anything had been heard of Baker," muttered the judge, rubbing one hand across his eyes.

"Exactly what I suspected! Ben must have fallen into the hands of those infernal detectives, who scared him into playing a part—for he returned to the mint and told the boys you bade them send Baker to Hogan's ranch in charge of two men, there to remain until you could pay him a visit. I saw Hogan this morning, and he declares that he knows nothing of the boys or their prisoner."

Judge Bruno grated his teeth furiously, but said nothing. Had everything gone wrong? Was he doomed to be shamefully foiled and defeated at every turn? Dan Brown had sworn that such should be the case, and his vow was being made good.

"Last night hardly seemed to be our night," added the gambler king, in a provokingly cool and drawling tone. "To add to the other *fiascos*, Equinox Tom must let Old Neb slip through his fingers—"

"He did not escape?" demanded Judge Bruno.

"Then all whom I have heard talk about the matter lied," laughed Kimball. "Everything that Tom touches of late, seems to go against him, and yet, if all that is said is true, he wasn't to blame in the affair. He took every precaution: stationed the men you selected as sharpshooters, in the cover around the death-tree, with orders to shoot any person who tried to rescue Old Neb, but Dan Brown proved himself more than a match for them all. The sign shows that he stole up close on a horse whose feet were muffled, then, just as Old Neb was swung up, he charged, cut the rope and dashed into the bushes again, his horse leaping upon Mat Burke in the darkness and crushing the life out of his body in a twinkling. He was followed by a shower of bullets, but only laughed mockingly and shouted back his compliments. The boys followed, but they were on foot and soon lost the track. This morning they tried to follow the trail, but within a mile of the death-oak, it was lost, and they abandoned the hunt in disgust."

Judge Bruno lay back on his pillow, his face that of a veritable fiend, his strong teeth gnashing and grating like those of a maddened wild boar, his swollen lips fringed with a bloody froth.

Craig Kimball watched him warily, not certain but that a deadly assault would be made upon himself as the bearer of such unwelcome tidings. It may be that he feared he had gone too far, for he abruptly said, with a complete change of tone:

"I thought it right that you should swallow the worst at a single dose, knowing that you would appreciate a bit of good news all the more thoroughly after such a bitter pill. In one word—what will you give for May Dunwood?"

Judge Bruno raised his head and glared into the face of the gambler king, but he saw nothing there to verify his suspicion. Kimball was sober and decidedly in earnest.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Just this: are you willing to sign over one half of the fortune you will win with May Dunwood, or Maud Beverley, provided I induce her to marry you, openly and legally?"

Judge Bruno stared at the speaker in open-eyed amazement, unable for the moment to believe the evidence of his senses. But he soon saw that the gambler king was not playing with him. His eyes and countenance betrayed the deep interest with which he awaited the answer to his proposition.

It was not long delayed, assuming a most decided shade.

With a snarl like that of an infuriated wolf, Judge Bruno leaped off the bed and flung himself upon Kimball, striving to fasten upon his throat, his teeth gnashing and grating horribly, his features distorted and almost black.

"Curse you! *you* struck me—*you* stole her away, and now have the impudence to offer to sell her back—"

Unexpected though the assault must have been, Craig Kimball proved himself equal to the occasion, and after a brief struggle, flung his antagonist back upon the bed, holding him there with a gripe of steel while he spoke:

"Don't play the fool, if you can help it. I did not strike you—Sol Scott dealt you that blow and rescued the girl."

"Then what do you mean? Let up, curse you!"

The gambler king released his hold and leaped lightly back to his chair, a revolver drawn and covering the judge as that worthy struggled to a sitting posture.

"I don't want to hurt you, mate, for you are worth more to me alive than dead," quietly uttered Kimball, keeping his weapon at a level with the heart of the judge. "But try another trick like that, and I'll fit you for a coffin, sure!"

Judge Bruno showed his teeth with an ugly smile.

"*You* would be the candidate for a funeral, if I was one-half the man I used to be, but I am glad that it has turned out thus. We can't afford to quarrel now. Only, don't try another devilish joke like that!"

"It is a joke that I mean shall put a million or more into my pocket," laughed the gambler, lowering his weapon.

"You were not in earnest?" eagerly demanded Judge Bruno.

"Never more so than now," was the smiling reply. "Listen, and I'll try to convince you. As soon as I heard that story about Reuben Baker and Ben Marlin, I made all haste back to town, for I longed for revenge on my enemies quite as much as you did, and I got here just in the nick of time."

"I caught a glimpse of a man carrying off a bundle that I readily guessed was May Dunwood, though it was too dark for me to recognize *you*. The next moment I saw you laid out by a tall fellow, who took the girl from your arms and ran away from the spot. I knew that the last captor could not be you, from its being so tall, and guessing the truth, I dogged him until in a deserted spot near the edge of town, when I leaped upon him and sent my knife clean to the hilt between his shoulders!"

"You killed the devil?" exploded Judge Bruno.

"He never even groaned when I jerked my steel out," and the gambler king laughed exultingly. "Never did a stout fellow die more easily than Sol Scott—"

"You know it was him? You are sure there is no mistake?"

"You shall judge for yourself this very day," was the prompt response. "I made sure that he was dead, then dragged his body into a deserted shanty, pulled up a plank and stowed the cold meat snugly away, where it will lie safely enough until we can dispose of it more effectually."

"This done, I picked up the girl, still in a faint, and took her to a secure hiding-place, leaving her in Kate's charge."

A fiendish laugh broke from the lips of the judge as he leaned forward and warmly grasped the hand of his worthy ally.

"We'll triumph yet, thanks to your long head and skillful hands! Lead me to the spot—"

"There's no particular need of haste," smiled Kimball. "You have forgotten my offer. Sign an agreement promising us—for Kate is an equal sharer in any good fortune that falls to me—one half of the fortune that you gain by making Maud Beverley your wife, and I pledge you my word that you shall marry her before this day's sun sets!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

TO THE DEATH!

"Ef it wasn't quite sech a long pull—or ef my eyes wasn't so badly bunged up—or ef I on'y hed a good rifle!"

These words, muttered barely above his breath, dropped from the lips of Equinox Tom, the bully of Red Rock, on the same day and at nearly the same minute that Craig Kimball offered to sell Judge Bruno a bride. The spot was a lonely and desolate-looking place, several miles to the north-west of Red Rock, and Equinox Tom lay in ambush under secure cover that stood nearly a hundred yards from where the rocky, precipitous hill rose from the end of the valley-like "pocket."

The bully of Red Rock had suffered intense mortification at being so thoroughly outwitted by Dan Brown on the past night, and he doggedly kept up the hunt for Old Neb and his bold rescuer, long after the majority of the lynchers declared their belief that it was but wasted time to search further. He felt that it was his last chance of regaining his lost prestige as "chief," and backed up by the sharpshooters who were eager to earn the heavy reward offered by

Judge Bruno, he doggedly persisted, though all signs of a trail had been lost early in the day.

To increase their chances of striking the lost trail, the party separated, and soon after Equinox Tom made a discovery that sent the blood leaping madly through his veins until a red mist overspread his vision and he staggered on his feet like a drunken man.

Little effort has been made in these pages to depict the tortures experienced by the proud bully at the defeats he repeatedly suffered at the hands of the Cherokee, simply because they were so furious, intense and complicated as to defy the power of words to tersely analyze them. Defeat, to an acknowledged "chief," means disgrace or death, unless speedily changed to victory the most complete. At the first symptom of declining fortune, a dozen claimants to the title will spring up, and the long course of fighting must be repeated, or down the once popular idol is hurled, covered with insult and obloquy by the very ones who were proud to lie down in the dust before him and kiss his feet.

Only the swiftly succeeding events involving even more important characters than himself, had kept Equinox Tom from having to face this ordeal, but he knew that it could not be long averted unless he should succeed in turning the tables upon the man who had degraded him.

When this is understood, some idea of his emotions can be formed, now that he saw before him the figure of Kostoyeak, the young chief of the Cherokee Bird Clan.

The Indian was half reclining at the base of a vine-wreathed rock, his head drooping as though asleep, but that he was only drowsing could be told from the occasional curls of smoke that issued from his thin nostrils.

As soon as he could command his raging passions sufficiently, Equinox Tom began creeping toward his unsuspecting enemy, using all possible precautions against making any noise sufficient to place the keen-sensed Indian upon his guard.

Had he been under the eyes of his friends or of any who could possibly dispute his right to the title of chief, the Bully of Red Rock might have acted differently, but now he only thought of reaching a point from whence he could surely slay the Cherokee by a single shot. After that he could easily elaborate the story to suit himself.

But he was doomed to disappointment, for he soon found that he could not crawl much within one hundred yards of the drowsy red-skin without fully exposing his person, and that, with such marvelous skill as Kostoyeak had repeatedly displayed with the pistol, would be almost the same as willful suicide.

Equinox Tom was what is commonly called a "dead shot" himself, and had his eyes been sound, he would not have hesitated long before opening fire. But the repeated blows he had received, added to the severe scorching when his hair and beard were singed off, had caused his eyes to nearly close and fill with a painful mist that precluded the idea of making a delicate shot.

Chafing with a sullen fury he lay in ambush, watching his hated foe, carelessly lying there almost within his power, until he could no longer keep down his lust for blood. Steadying his revolver in a crotch, he covered the recumbent form and was just on the point of pulling the trigger when Kostoyeak suddenly sat up, thus carrying his body out of range for the instant.

Before Equinox Tom could shift his aim, the Cherokee arose to his feet and moved slowly forward, heading directly for the covert where his deadliest foe lay hidden. But it was clear that he did not suspect the truth, for he took no precautions, touched no weapon, strolling leisurely along, his chin upon his breast as though lost in deep meditation.

Fairly holding his breath with a Satanic eagerness, Equinox Tom followed the Indian with the muzzle of his revolver, his heart thumping furiously, for he now felt assured of his revenge. Already he could, by a simple contraction of his forefinger, send a bullet unerringly home to the heart of the red-skin—yet he did not fire.

Should Kostoyeak continue in his present course, he would pass by the ambush within arm's length, and a quick assault might capture him alive—a subject for tortures such as man never before invented for his fellow-man!

In readiness to fire at the first deviation from the direct course, Equinox Tom awaited the proper moment. It was not long delayed. All unsuspecting, Kostoyeak strolled on, and then the Bully of Red Rock broke cover, aiming a crushing blow at the Indian's head with clubbed revolver.

Kostoyeak heard the first rustle, and quickly turned his head in that direction, thus partially foiling the blow, causing the weapon to glance from his temple and fall with benumbing force upon his left shoulder. And then the two strong men closed in a furious grapple, with the odds all in favor of Equinox Tom.

Staggered by the blow and taking by surprise, the Cherokee was overthrown, his antagonist adding his heavy weight to the force of the fall, but the lithe, powerful Indian made a good

fight. Over and over the ground they rolled, snarling and breathing heavily, knowing that it must be victory or death, neither thinking of asking or granting quarter.

Then Equinox Tom's bony fingers closed upon the throat of the Indian and dashed his head violently against a rock. At the same moment he felt a burning pain in his side and jerked back as the muscles of the Cherokee relaxed. A long knife protruded from between his ribs, and as Equinox Tom plucked it forth, a deathly sensation crept over him, and he believed that he had received a fatal wound. Even in death he resolved to make sure of revenge, and aimed the bloody blade at the heart of his motionless antagonist, but he fell forward, the weapon burying itself in the earth.

He was dimly conscious of loud shouts and hurrying feet, and then felt that he was being raised up from off the body of his fallen foe, and his wound receiving attention. And then he heard a voice that he recognized say:

"Tain't no use—that blood comes straight from the heart! How is it with the Injun, Beauty? Dead or dyin'?"

"Neither one nor t'other. Clip on the head's all."

These words restored Equinox Tom quicker than the most powerful cordials could have done the work. He felt that he had received his death blow, while the man he hated so bitterly had escaped comparatively uninjured. Was he to triumph even to the end like this?

He started to a sitting posture, driving back that deathly faintness by a powerful exertion of will. As he felt the hot blood flow more freely, he picked up a piece of moss and thrust it into the gaping wound.

"Give me whisky, somebody!" he said, hoarsely, paying no attention to the questions showered upon him by Beauty Borden and his associates, but grasping one of the proffered flasks of liquor and draining off its contents in a single draught.

The effects of this were almost instantaneous. His voice was stronger, his motions freer than before, but he was not deceived.

"Never mind the how an' why—I hain't got time nor breath to spar'. The Injun struck deep, an' his knife tetched home base I reckon. But I've sworn by heaven an' hell that I'd kill him, an' I'm goin' to do it, in fa'r fight, too!"

"We'll truss the red cuss up an' keep him in limbo ontel you git over that nasty dig," said Beauty Borden, but the Bully of Red Rock smiled faintly.

"I tell ye boys, this is my last deal, an' it's mighty nigh the last turn, too. I hed plenty chance to knock the critter over with a blue pill, but I didn't do it. The boys saw him git the better o' me down in town, an' I thought I'd take the p'izen cuss pris'ner an' turn him loose down thar, whar the same eyes could see the eend. But he pulled his knife an' sent it home. Not that I keer much. I've hed my turn on top, an' bin chief o' Red Rock longer than any man that come afore me. Ever sence, I've lived like a chief, an' now I 'tend to die like a chief."

Equinox Tom held out his hand for Borden's flask, and as the Cherokee gave signs of returning consciousness, he added:

"Tie the Injun to one o' them saplin's, an' let him face the other tree. Leave him free from the waist up, an' give him a fa'r deal. I don't ax no odds over him, though this blood is a-dreenin' the marrer out o' my bones. Give him a taste o' whisky, somebody, fer the sooner he's in fix fer fightin', the better fer me."

At length the ruffians began to understand the meaning of Equinox Tom, and eager to witness the novel duel, they bound the Indian by the lower limbs to a sapling, leaving his body and arms at liberty. Another tree faced him, not more than four feet away, and with evident pain, Equinox Tom planted himself against this.

"Tie me the same's you hev him. I don't know as either of us would try to run away, but my legs is growin' weak an' trembly from this cussed, bitin' wound, an' I wouldn't stan' no show 'longside o' him any other way. I swore I'd hev his life, an' I mean to keep my word. He's killed me a'ready, but he's welcome to try his hand at fancy carvin' while I'm diggin' my way into his heart."

Kostoyeak was now fully restored, and a cold, contemptuous smile curled his thin lips as he listened to the speech of the death-stricken bully of Red Rock. He knew that such a duel could end only in mutual death, but he did not flinch or even think of uttering a word in protest.

"Give us the steel, Beauty," added Equinox Tom, his voice perceptibly weaker and more husky. "Tell the boys o' Red Rock jest how the eend come. Mebbe I hain't led the wisest life I could 'a' follered, but one thing no man kin say without lyin': that I didn't die like a 'chief!'"

A naked knife was handed each one of the duelists, then the ruffians gathered around in a circle to enjoy the "fun." But this was cut vexatiously short. Equinox Tom already felt the icy hand of death closing upon his heart, and thinking only of killing before he died, he

flung his body forward until it struck the broad breast of the Cherokee, whose keen knife was playing like crimson lightning, each wound deep enough to let out a life. But hatred like that of the Bully of Red Rock would not be denied even by death. And then the two gory bodies fell over sideways, the heart of each cloven in twain!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WEDDING AND THE GUESTS.

LATE that same Monday afternoon, Judge Bruno was putting the finishing touches to his toilet. He had ever been noted for his nicety of dress, and ever since his first appearance in Red Rock under the title he now bore, he had been a model of neatness. The events of the past two days had sadly demoralized his personal appearance, but his double life as a detective and criminal had taught him more secrets of the toilet than even the most fastidious society belle ever dreamed of, and he took a self-satisfied look at his reflection in the glass.

A skillful use of paints and cosmetics had covered his bruises and discolorations from sight, his hair was trained over the broken scalp, and dressed in spotless linen and neat fitting broadcloth, he did not look so very much unlike an expectant bridegroom as he impatiently glanced at his watch.

"Time is up and past!" he muttered, a black scowl corrugating his brows. "If he fails me now—if he has been playing with me—I'll tear him limb from limb—bah! I am a fool. He dare not try such a game, at a time like this. Our lives hang by a hair, for if Sol Scott is dead, Dan Brown is still alive. Curse him! I could die with a good grace, just for one sure blow at him!"

The words died away into hoarse, inarticulate growling as the judge strode up and down his room like an angry wild beast measuring its narrow cage. Everything had gone against him thus far in the bold game he had set out to play. Would the same ill-fortune continue, or was there a rift in the clouds? A very short time would settle that now, for he could hear the leisurely tread of human feet upon the stairs—the bridal party was coming! Still, he slipped one hand into his bosom where he felt a brace of small but deadly derringers, preparing for the worst.

A few moments of breathless suspense, then there came a peculiar rap upon his door; the signal used by Craig Kimball, the gambler king of Red Rock.

Judge Bruno quickly flung the door open, then stepped aside to admit Craig Kimball, a venerable white-haired man in somber black, and two ladies, both closely veiled, the smaller one leaning heavily upon the arm of her companion. Before these the judge bowed low, but there was no visible response to his salutation.

He flashed a keen glance at Craig Kimball, who smiled deprecatingly as he removed his hat and placed chairs for the three persons who accompanied him.

"You mustn't expect too much, mate. This is a rather exceptional case, and a good deal must be taken for granted. Never fear him," the gambler added, laughing as Judge Bruno cast a warning glance toward the old gentleman. "The whole country couldn't furnish a better tool for our purpose. He is deaf as an adder, and simple-hearted as an infant. I stumbled on him by a lucky chance, and corraled him as soon as I satisfied myself by a peep at his papers that he was all right—a regularly ordained minister. I have stuffed him well, and he thinks that it is to mend a young lady's honor that his services are required. That will explain any little shyness Miss Maud Beverley may display."

These last sentences were uttered in a whisper, and removed the few doubts the judge may have entertained.

"Let's get through with the affair as soon as possible. That infernal Dan Brown may put in an appearance at any moment, but once she is my wife, I can defy him on that point," hastily muttered Bruno, locking the door.

"There are a few preliminaries to be disposed of first. Kate, please see that Miss Beverley pays attention to what I say, and let her correct me if I make any mistake."

The gambler's wife pushed back her own veil, then removed that from the pale face of her trembling companion.

Judge Bruno's eyes lighted up with an unholy fire as he beheld his intended victim, even more lovely now than when in the rosy flush of perfect health. But then he shifted his gaze, lest she should read the double treachery he meditated.

Craig Kimball moved one hand as if to command attention.

"We are assembled here to celebrate the marriage ceremony, under somewhat peculiar circumstances. There has been but little of the customary courtship or love-making—indeed, there is not much love lost on either side; but let that pass," he added quickly as a warning growl broke from the lips of Judge Bruno.

"The allusion was made merely that there might be no misunderstanding between the two contracting parties."

"You, Miss Maud Beverley, unknown to yourself, have fallen heir to a fortune, more or less large. This gentleman holds the only existing proofs of your identity, and without his consent or aid, you could never touch one cent of that fortune. You have lived all your life without it, and can still do so, when the only means of saving the life of your adopted father, consists in surrendering all claim upon that fortune."

"Let it go—he may have it all—only spare my poor father's life—and spare me," faltered the maiden, trembling.

"It can only be claimed by you in person, or by your legal heirs—in this case your husband," equably added the gambler king, smiling coldly as his wife flashed an indignant glance at him. "You have given your consent to the proposal I brought you from my friend, the judge, and it is too late now for any retraction."

"I consented only conditionally," quickly uttered May, a deep flush overspreading her countenance.

"Exactly; I am about to state those conditions. Correct me, please, if I vary from the terms agreed upon."

"You agree to marry with Judge Bruno, or Don Farrar, to give him his rightful name. You agree to sign over to him all your monetary rights, the papers necessary to this having been made out by a competent lawyer, and which I hold, lacking only your signature as a married woman to make it effective. In return the bridegroom elect agrees first: to set the man known as Old Neb at liberty, sound in mind and limb; second, to resign all marital rights and privileges, to never molest you by word or deed, or seek to see you, unless you first send for him. This, I believe, is all. Have I forgotten anything?" and the gambler king glanced from the maiden to the judge.

May shook her head, afraid to trust her voice, and Judge Bruno said:

"I am ready to perform my part of the contract to the very letter, though I cannot help saying that I hope and trust my future wife and I will eventually meet on more agreeable terms. I shall ever hold myself in readiness to obey her summons—and from my heart I trust it will not be long delayed."

His words were plausible enough, but beneath the surface lay hidden a treacherous resolve to claim and hold wife as well as fortune. Poor May! she was playing with fire!

"Further delay is cruel," cried Kate Kimball, her face pale and hard set, her black eyes flashing angrily. "Do you not see that the poor child is almost fainting?"

"We are sorry for her, but the interest of your friend and your husband must be cared for," said the gambler king, a little sternly. "Remember that you have as heavy a stake in this little game as any of us."

The clergyman had been sitting at the table, preparing his books, politely refraining from watching the members of this strange bridal company, but now he arose and spoke, with a soft, gentle voice:

"Dear friends, I must remind you that time is passing rapidly. Urgent business calls me away from this place by the evening stage, now almost due. I can ill afford to lose a day. To oblige me, please prepare for the ceremony."

Judge Bruno was even more impatient, fearing lest Dan Brown should even yet succeed in foiling him, and grasping the trembling maiden's hand, he drew her to the table.

The ceremony was brief and simple, being that used in the Methodist Church, and the clergyman in his haste to catch the stage, made but very few comments.

As the closing words were spoken, Craig Kimball stepped forward, smiling pleasantly as he exclaimed:

"Dear friend, pray accept my heartfelt congratulations!"

Just how it happened, Judge Bruno never could tell, but there was a faint double click, and a pair of handcuffs were fastened upon his wrists!

He stared at them for a moment as though stupefied.

May glided swiftly away from him and stood beside the gambler's wife, who flung one arm protectingly around her.

Craig Kimball uttered a mocking laugh as he tore off the false beard and wig, tossing them upon the table. His face was still marred with plaster and bandages, but his identity could no longer be doubted. It was Dan Brown of Denver!

Nor was this the only transformation. The clergyman removed his disguise, and revealed the clear cut, handsome features of Sol Scott!

A hissing curse of furious rage and despair broke from the judge, and he endeavored to thrust his manacled hands into his bosom, where his pistols were hidden, but like a panther Dan Brown leaped upon him and flung him heavily to the floor. Rapidly searching his person, and removing all weapons, the triumphant detective arose.

"Have I not kept my vow, Don Farrar? I swore to defeat your most cherished plans, to cover you with shame and disgrace, and in the

and to bring you to the gallows. All but the fact I have performed, and that will come in good time."

In sullen fury and hatred the defeated wretch glared up at the man whom he had once called friend, only to treacherously stab him in the back. Since that day all had gone wrong with him. Every scheme had failed, and all through the agency of this man. Like a veritable bloodhound he had followed the crooked trail through all its devious windings, with only one end in view. And now he was crowned with success—his master-stroke had been delivered with crushing effect.

Dan Brown laughed lightly as he noted that venomous glare.

"Your cup is not yet full, Don Farrar. Let me fill it to overflowing. While I, as Craig Kimball, have been keeping you in play to day, my men have been busily at work. They have raided the Hogan ranch, and have swept your mint clean, gathering enough proofs to hang you higher than Haman! Every man of your gang has or will be arrested, and unless rumor lies, you will have more than one worthy mate to keep you company on the gallows."

"But let that pass for the present. There are a few belated guests outside, waiting to congratulate the happy bridegroom."

As he spoke, Dan Brown crossed the room, turned the key and flung open the door, revealing a number of eager faces. Among them Judge Bruno recognized Old Neb, Reuben Baker and Turk Elder.

Suddenly he arose to his feet and cast a quick glance around him. Then, with a wild, desperate cry he crossed the room in one bound and hurled himself headlong through the window that looked down upon the stone paved sidewalk!

But even escape by suicide was denied him. Dan Brown followed with a panther-like leap, and clutched him by the feet, dragging him back into the room, panting and bleeding.

"Fool! did you think to cheat me so easily? I swore to hunt you to the gallows and I mean to keep my vow!"

CHAPTER XXIX. CONCLUSION.

A BRIEF gathering of scattered threads, a few words concerning the after events, and this history of Dan Brown's master-stroke comes to a close.

It will be remembered that Craig Kimball was sent to the "mint" to enlist the force there in the attempt to lynch Old Neb and entrap the detectives. That he did not succeed was no fault of his, for he fell in with the little party that had only a few minutes before rescued Reuben Baker from his two guards, and was taken prisoner so suddenly and adroitly that he could not utter a cry or strike a blow in self-defense.

It was Sol Scott who rescued May Dunwood from the disguised judge, and placing her in a place of safety, returned to see what could be done for Old Neb. Despite the bold assertions of Dan Brown, at that time he had as allies only Sol Scott, Kostoyeak, Charles Dingan and Turk Elder, though hourly expecting the arrival of reinforcements. Under these circumstances, open resistance to the lynchers was not to be thought of, especially as Dingan had discovered the subtle plan laid by Judge Bruno for their destruction. But neither of the detectives were men to abandon a friend, or the friend of a friend, in peril, and procuring a horse, Dan Brown made a bold dash and bore the dipsomaniac away as already detailed.

The capture of Craig Kimball and the rescue of May Dunwood suggested a brilliant stroke to Dan Brown. The gambler king had twice successfully personated the detective—now the detective resolved to reverse matters. This was no very difficult matter, thanks to his good stock of disguises and the wonderful resemblance in face, form and voice between himself and Craig Kimball.

Changing clothes with the gambler, bandaging his face by the sullen pattern before him, and fastening on a wig and beard, Dan Brown in the gray dawn of morning went direct to the gambler's house, where the anxious wife met him with open arms.

Dan Brown did not test the perfection of his disguise too far, but frankly placed the matter before Kate Kimball, declaring that should anything happen to him, the gambler would be put to death without mercy.

As the result has already been disclosed, there is no need to dwell upon the arguments used by the detective. Kate consented to serve him in his bold plan against Judge Bruno, the more readily that she hated him as only a passionate woman can hate a man who has insulted her shamefully.

It was harder to gain May Dunwood's consent, and in all probability Dan Brown would have failed in this most important essential, only for the co-operation of Sol Scott, whose low whispered arguments proved wonderfully effective. And so the crowning triumph was engineered by Dan Brown of Denver, and his treacherous friend made to drain the cup of humiliation to the bitter dregs.

There was a real Kostoyeak, chief of the Cherokee Bird Clan, on the stage, but the part he played in the drama was comparatively slight.

It was Sol Scott in disguise who twice rescued May Dunwood from Equinox Tom; Sol Scott who defeated the Bully of Red Rock in the gambling house; Sol Scott, aided by Dan Brown, who surprised Judge Bruno and Craig Kimball, and the same couple who sprung the counter-ambush upon Equinox Tom, at the split-pine thicket.

With this much by way of explanation concerning the past, the reader can fully understand all that occurred.

The close of that day witnessed the complete triumph of Dan Brown and his partner, Sol Scott. The nest of road-agents, counterfeiters and rascals in general was broken up; all those against whom serious charges could be brought were arrested, among them Beauty Borden, who confessed that Old Neb was innocent of the death of Pete Tompkins.

Old Neb never recovered from the effects of that terrible fall, though he bore no visible marks of injury. He fell into a rapid decline and died ere the week was out.

But before he died he confessed everything concerning the past, furnishing proof of May's identity with the missing daughter of Judge Beverley that could not be shaken.

The unfortunate old man received a respectable burial, and Sol Scott supported the weeping maiden to the grave.

Several of the spectators were seen to wink knowingly, and after events proved their shrewdness. For when our friends bade adieu to Red Rock with their prisoners, Sol Scott left a plighted love behind him.

Don Farrar, alias Judge Bruno was returned to State's prison, and when he shall serve his time out, he will be called upon to answer to the more serious charge of murder. There is some talk of his being pardoned on the old sentence, so that he may be tried for murder, and Dan Brown still vows that he will see him on the scaffold with the hangman's noose around his throat.

Sol Scott took Fergus Randolph to New York, and delivered him to the authorities, but the gambler king managed to cheat the gallows. One day his lawyer and he were found clasped in each other's arms, stone dead. That lawyer was the gambler's wife, cunningly disguised. She had brought him poison, and they crossed the dark river together.

Within a month, Sol Scott returned to Red Rock, and then there was a genuine bridal, in which May Dunwood took a vast deal more pleasure, and looked a thousand times more beautiful, if that could be.

Her rights to the vast fortune have been made clear, and Sol Scott has forever abandoned the detective profession, greatly to the regret of Dan Brown, who is still in harness, a dread to evil doers.

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